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ABSTRACT

THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS
ABOUT THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF BLACK
STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

David Roland Grice

Chair: James A. Tucker

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ABOUT THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF BLACK STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Name of researcher: David Roland Grice

Name and degree of faculty chair: James A. Tucker, Ph.D.

Date completed: August 2012

Statement of the Problem

There is an over-representation of Black students in special education. Black students are typically referred for special education consideration by the end of the fourth grade. One effort to reduce the large number of referrals in Connecticut was *Courageous Conversations About Race*. *Courageous Conversations About Race* is designed to address what educators, families, and other community groups can do to improve teaching and learning across racial lines. It served as a strategy for educators to confront and deinstitutionalize racism. *Courageous Conversations About Race* is an effective means to address the issues of race in schools/districts where over-representation exists. Although various Connecticut schools have participated in *Courageous Conversations About Race* over the past 5 years, the State Education Resource Center (SERC) and the Connecticut

State Department of Education (CSDE) are uncertain about its usefulness in changing the perceptions of teachers regarding race and referrals of students to special education.

Research Design

A qualitative study was used to examine the perceptions of fourth-grade general-education elementary teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to special education. This qualitative study was to gather information about the perceptions of teachers regarding referrals to special education and race. The study captured the perceptions of 16 general-education elementary teachers from three districts in Connecticut about the over-representation of Black students in special education.

Results

Research Question #1: How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education?

One of the themes that emerged in the analysis of the data was *A Teacher's Dilemma*. Teachers in this study described the difficulty they had in providing services for their students. They spoke about crowded classrooms consisting of 20 to 25 students, which makes it difficult to provide students with the attention that they need. Teachers in this study also mentioned that there is a wide spread of levels of students. Many of their Black students are reading below grade level (e.g., reading on a first- or second-grade level). They found themselves using referrals to special education as a way to cope with the many challenges in their classrooms and to get students extra support.

Research Question #2: How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*?

Three themes describe the perceptions of the teachers regarding how the training influenced them: *I See Color Now*, *Teacher Mis-Match*, and *Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development*.

In the theme *I See Color Now*, teachers reported that student data are being reviewed more through the lenses of race. The teachers in this study noted that through *CC About Race* their racial consciousness has been increased. In addition, they shared that the *CC About Race* has taught them that they should see the color of their students and that if they did not see their color, then they did not see their students.

The next theme that emerged was a *Teacher Mis-Match*. Teachers in this study reported that there is a disconnection between students and teachers. They spoke about the demographic of Connecticut's teachers being majority White, female, and from middle-class backgrounds, whereas the student population is Black or of color and from low income backgrounds. Teachers in this study noted that *CC About Race* illuminated for them that a teacher does not necessarily need to be Black in order to teach students of color; however, they need to have a clear understanding of their own culture and understand the various cultures of their students in their classrooms.

In the final theme, *Affirming a Need for On-going Professional Development*, teachers in this study commented that the *CC About Race* seminars affirmed for them a need for on-going professional development with effective instructional strategies and training about different cultures, norms, and values. They spoke about a significant need

for professional development in the areas of race, diversity, culturally relevant instruction, and racial equity. Teachers in this study noted that with the demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation, there is need for on-going, on-site, job-embedded/follow-up professional development.

Conclusions

Although this qualitative study showed promise for identifying factors contributing to the over-representation of Black students in special education, engaging in courageous conversations about race is clearly not an institutionalized practice in the schools represented in this study. However, as we consider the statistical facts, it is difficult not to think about racial inequality as a predominant factor causing today's achievement gap. It is our responsibility, as educators, to garner the courage to disaggregate and interpret the data through a "cultural eye." Only then can we engage in *courageous conversations about race in order to improve student achievement.*

Andrews University

School of Education

THE PERCEPTIONS OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS
ABOUT THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF BLACK
STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

David Roland Grice

August 2012

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

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Date approved

This dissertation is dedicated to the improvement
of equable educational opportunities
and outcomes for all
students of color.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	viii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Background to the Problem	1
Context of the Study: <i>Courageous Conversations</i>	
<i>About Race</i>	7
Experience as a <i>Courageous Conversations</i>	
<i>About Race Coach</i>	12
Statement of the Problem	13
Purpose of the Study	14
Research Questions	14
Research Design	14
Theoretical Framework	15
Importance of the Study	16
Definitions of Terms	16
Delimitations	20
Limitations	20
Assumptions	21
Organization of Study	21
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	22
Introduction	22
A Historical Context of the Over-Representation of Black	
Students in Special Education	24
Legislation and Litigation	24
Critical Race Theory	27
Special Education	32
Connecticut Situation	36
The Debate: A Controversial and Unresolved Issue	37
National Trends in the Over-Representation of Black	
Students in Special Education	41
Assumptions About the Over-Representation of Black	
Students in Special Education Programs	44

Non-Biased Assessment.....	47
Teacher Expectations of Black Students.....	53
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Effective Instructional Practices	55
Effective Culturally Appropriate Classroom Management.....	59
Teacher Relationship and Rapport With Students	64
Summary	66
3. METHODOLOGY	69
Introduction.....	69
Qualitative Methods.....	69
Self as the Research Instrument.....	70
Purposeful Sampling.....	74
Data Collection	76
Semi-Structured Interviews	77
Documents	78
Data Analysis.....	82
Trustworthiness/Validity Issues.....	83
Ethics.....	84
Generalizability Issues	85
4. RESULTS	86
Introduction.....	86
The Essence of Their Stories	89
The Essence of Miss Griffin	89
The Essence of Mrs. Hicks	90
The Essence of Miss Green.....	90
The Essence of Miss Ellis	91
The Essence of Mr. Trapper.....	91
The Essence of Mr. Matthew	92
The Essence of Miss Cohen.....	92
The Essence of Miss Sutton.....	93
The Essence of Mrs. Carter.....	93
The Essence of Miss Ryan.....	94
The Essence of Miss Norwood	94
The Essence of Miss Vaughters	95
The Essence of Miss James.....	95
The Essence of Miss Vitale.....	96
The Essence of Miss Johnson	96
The Essence of Miss Brown	97
Emergent Themes	97
A Teacher's Dilemma	98

Special Education: A Place to Get Extra Support for Students.....	100
Challenging Behaviors.....	102
Students With Language and Reading Concerns.....	106
Low Expectations.....	111
Racism in Schools.....	113
I See Color Now.....	122
Examples of Color-Blindness in the Classroom	129
Teacher Mis-Match.....	136
Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development	147
Professional Development on Different Cultures	148
Professional Development on Race and the Special Education Process	150
Summary	155
 V. CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY	158
Introduction.....	158
Research Questions	158
Research Design	158
Theoretical Framework.....	161
Results.....	164
A Teacher's Dilemma.....	164
I See Color Now.....	167
Teacher Mis-Match.....	169
Affirming a Need for Ongoing Profession Development	171
Discussion	172
Conclusions.....	180
Recommendations.....	181
For Schools	181
For Teachers.....	182
Implications and Suggestions for Further Study.....	183
How Would I Change the Study?	183
 Appendix	
A. REQUEST LETTER FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTICIPATION	186
B. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL	196
C. CONSENT FORMS.....	198
D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	202
E. DISTRICT REFERENCE GROUPS (DRGs)	206

REFERENCE LIST	208
VITA	231

LIST OF TABLES

1.	Characteristics of Participating School Districts	75
2.	Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District A.....	79
3.	Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District B	80
4.	Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District C	81

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*In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame
by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful
for those people who rekindle the inner spirit.
—Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)*

I wish to thank the general education teachers from District Reference Group H in Connecticut who participated in this research study. I value and respect their commitment to providing all students with a quality and equitable education.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Program

The over-representation of Black students in special education and the quality of their educational experiences have been regarded as among the most significant issues faced by the U.S. public school system in the past 40 years (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). Despite court challenges (*Larry P. v. Wilson Riles*, 1979; *PASE v. Hannon*, 1980), federal reports (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; National Research Council, 2002), and abundant research on the issue (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Dunn, 1968; Hosp & Reschly, 2004), the problem of the over-representation of Black students has persisted.

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all individuals with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and mandates non-discriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities. Children are not to be identified as disabled because of poor achievement due to environmental disadvantage or ethnic, linguistic, or racial difference. This was made clear by the prescribed evaluation procedures and definitions of disability conditions in IDEA. However, nationally, some ethnic groups, specifically Black students, tend to be significantly over-represented in two special education categories: intellectually disabled

and emotional disturbance (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Oswald & Coutinho, 2001; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999).

Over-representation, or the disproportionate placement of students of a given ethnic group in special education programs, means that the percentage of students from that group in such programs is disproportionately greater than their percentage in the school population as a whole (Oswald et al., 1999). For example, Black students account for only 14.8% of the general population of 6- to 21-year-old students, but they make up 20% of the special education population across all disabilities (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Black students are 2.41 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation, 1.13 times more likely to be labeled as learning disabled, and 1.68 times as likely to be found to have an emotional or behavioral disorder (Klingner et al., 2005).

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2002), Blacks accounted for 16% of the student population; however, Blacks represented 32%, or double the current representation, of students with mental disabilities in special education. For Blacks to represent a larger percentage of the special education student population than general education is indicative of over-representation within special education.

Black students are usually referred to special education during the fourth grade by general education teachers (Kunjufu, 1986; Morgan, 1980). It is around this grade level that serious academic difficulties manifest in Black students. The curricular focus shifts dramatically between third and fourth grades as reading for comprehension becomes a necessity. At this time, many of these students are still trying to learn fundamental reading skills. According to results reported from a national survey by the U.S.

Department of Education on reading for the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), more than two-thirds of fourth-graders tested cannot read proficiently (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001).

Chall (1983) reported that some students may read adequately from kindergarten to third grade but suddenly begin to struggle when they reach fourth grade. This phenomenon has been referred to as the “fourth-grade slump.” Chall and Jacobs (1983) discussed two major stages of reading development: learning to read and reading to learn. The first stage typically encompasses Grades 1, 2, 3 when students are learning to read. The second stage encompasses Grades 4 and beyond when students are reading to learn. Fourth-grade texts become more complex and abstract and contain language and concepts that are more challenging. Consequently, some students’ reading scores dip precipitously.

Cummins (1984) contends that it is critical for educators to understand the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) challenges posed by learning to read and by acquiring new content knowledge. CALP can take about 5 to 7 years to develop. Therefore, Cummins noted that it may take significantly longer for English language learners (ELL) to develop the academic language proficiency needed for school success.

Kunjufu (1986) noted the poor transition that Black students, especially boys, make between the primary and intermediate grades. He contends that there is a marked decline in achievement beginning at fourth grade and that many factors come together to contribute to the “fourth grade failure syndrome.” Morgan (1980) found that after the third grade, the achievement rate of Black students began a downward spiral, which tended to continue in the child’s academic career. At this transition point the classroom environment is transformed from socially interactive to a competitive, individualistic,

learning environment (Morgan, 1980, p. 51). Hale-Benson (1989) also made similar observations about several critical periods of Black children's development. One such period seems to be the fourth and fifth grades when they experience a slump in their achievement. Hale-Benson further noted that it is around the fourth grade that many students are referred to special education programs for assessment.

Referral to special education has been recognized as an important step in determining eligibility for special education services. Large percentages of referred students are tested after referral, and large percentages of tested students are determined to be eligible for special education (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1983). Given that referral is important in determining eligibility, questions have been raised as to whether racial bias exists in the referral process and contributes to the disproportionate number of Black students placed in special education (Ysseldyke, Vanderwood, & Shriner, 1992).

Losen and Orfield (2002) raised concerns about significant disproportionality in special education classification across the country in a 2000 Harvard study. Losen and Orfield reported that African American students in Connecticut, Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Nebraska were more than four times as likely to be identified as mentally retarded than were White students living in those states.

Connecticut has struggled to address over-identification and disproportion in special education for a number of years. While the state's overall prevalence rates for identification of students in need of special education have declined during the past decade, there are proportional differences among Connecticut school districts within racial and ethnical segments of student populations. Specifically, data submitted to the CSDE indicated that African American and Hispanic/Latino students are two to three

times more likely to be identified for special education than were their White peers in the categories of emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, and intellectually disabled.

The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the State Education Resource Center (SERC) are committed to addressing the problem of the over-representation of Black students in special education. They applied for, and were awarded, a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Partnerships Coordinating Committee to conduct a state-level summit to examine the issues in Connecticut. In March of 2003, Connecticut school districts, policy makers, educational administrators, families, students, advocates, public school educators, service providers, higher education faculty, elected officials, and community representatives joined forces at the first of a series of Annual Summits entitled, *Closing the Achievement Gap: Connecticut Summit on Over-Identification and Disproportion in Special Education*. Multiple goals were established: (a) to explore issues and perspectives; (b) to dialogue about approaches and strategies; and (c) to identify steps in collaboratively addressing over-identification and disproportion in special education (Closing the Achievement Gap: Connecticut Summit on Over-Identification and Disproportion in Special Education, 2003).

Despite Summits and multiple efforts at the state level, results are found to be less than ideal because the concern of the over-representation of Black students in special education still remains. Since inception, a total of five Annual Summits have been conducted. A combination of keynote speeches, concurrent sessions, and opportunities for districts to engage in *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Pacific Education

Group, 2004) composed the day. Participants were appraised on: School Readiness and Accountability Schools legislation; addition to general education certification of a 36 credit-hour special education requirement; expansion of professional development programs on effective instruction; conversations about race; focused monitoring; Black and Hispanic/Latino Forums; and conferences on the education of students with diverse learning needs.

In response to this ongoing concern about the over-representation of Black students in special education, the CSDE and SERC designed an intentional program effort to address the issues of the over-representation of Black students in special education. They worked closely with various districts in an engaging professional-development program. The program was designed to identify, define, and examine the connection between race and student achievement. In conjunction with Glenn E. Singleton, Director of Pacific Educational Group and SERC Coaches, participating districts have engaged in *Courageous Conversations About Race* as a means to examine philosophies, policies, procedures, and practices in their district, schools, and classrooms that reflect institutionalized racism (Pacific Education Group, 2004). The session provided participating *Courageous Conversations* districts an opportunity to reflect on their journeys to achieve equity for all students.

Courageous Conversations About Race is designed to address what educators, families, and other community group members can do to improve teaching and learning across racial lines. *CC About Race* utilizes four agreements: Stay Engaged, Experience Discomfort, Speak Your Truth, and Expect/Accept Non-Closure; six conditions: Focus on Personal, Local and Immediate, Isolate Race, Normalize Social Construction and

Multiple Perspectives, Monitor Agreements, Conditions and Establish Parameters, Use a “Working Definition” for Race, Examine the Presence and Role of “Whiteness”; and the Courageous Conversation Compass—four primary ways people deal with racial information, events, and/or issues: Emotional, Intellectual, Moral, and Social, in order to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race (Singleton & Linton, 2006a).

The issue of the over-representation of Black students in special education cannot reside solely within the purview of special education (Dunn, 1968; National Research Council, 2002). It is symptomatic of a larger systemic issue that needs to be viewed through the lenses of general education. Although various districts have participated in *Courageous Conversations About Race* over the years, SERC and the CSDE are uncertain of its impact on the practice and perceptions of teachers regarding referrals to special education and race. This study is designed to describe how and in what ways general education teachers’ behaviors and perceptions have changed as a result of their school’s/district’s participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*?

Context of the Study: *Courageous Conversations About Race*

In 2004, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the State Education Resource Center (SERC) designed an intentional program effort to address the issues of the state’s over-representation of Black students in special education. The CSDE and SERC worked closely with Glenn Singleton, Director of Pacific Educational Group, and eight school districts in this unique professional-development seminar series, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, designed to address what educators, families, and other community group members could do to improve teaching and learning across

racial lines. *CC About Race* served as a strategy for educators/schools in confronting and deinstitutionalizing racism (Singleton & Linton, 2006a).

CC About Race consisted of a series of seminars designed to train school district equity leadership teams to engage, sustain, and deepen inter-racial dialogue in order to examine the impact of institutionalized racism in school. The central purpose of the seminars was to guide participants in identifying and addressing policies and practices that negatively impact the ability of students to achieve rigorous academic performance across racial lines and what educators, families, and other community group members can do to address the issues.

Through this engaging learning experience, teams from various school districts were provided with an opportunity to dialogue openly about racial perspectives and their impact on student achievement. They were provided with four agreements: Stay Engaged, Experience Discomfort, Speak Your Truth, and Expect/Accept Non-Closure; and six conditions: Focus on Personal, Local and Immediate, Isolate Race, Normalize Social Construction and Multiple Perspectives, Monitor Agreements, Conditions and Establish Parameters, Use a “Working Definition” for Race, Examine the Presence and Role of “Whiteness.” The agreements and conditions for *Courageous Conversations About Race* served as a protocol of sorts to help guide one through the uncomfortable journey of racial discovery.

The Courageous Conversation Compass was used to illustrate the four primary ways that people deal with racial information, events, and/or issues in order to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race (Singleton & Linton, 2006a). The Compass included the components of emotional (feeling), moral (believing), intellectual

(thinking), and social (doing) as equivalent parts of a foundational whole. The CC Compass graphic was constantly revisited throughout the seminar as an ongoing self-reflective process that encourages self-monitoring and full participation by each member of various teams attending the series.

The first year of SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, served as a planning year. Members of the District Equity Leadership Team (DELT), consisting of the superintendents and building-level principals, worked on building their capacity through professional development seminars and intersession meetings, SERC Coaches, and other district focus groups. Some of the topics included: (a) Defining Systemic Equity/Anti-racism Leadership and an Introduction to Courageous Conversations, (b) Breaking the Silence, (c) Ushering in "Courageous Conversations" About the Impact of Race on Student Achievement, (d) Engaging Critical Race Theory to Deepen Understanding of Racial Achievement Disparity and Special Education Disproportion, (e) Investigating Anti-Racism Education, Cultural Proficiency, and (f) Culturally Responsive Instruction.

An essential goal of *Courageous Conversations About Race* was that members of the DELT teams would in turn replicate and/or turnkey the information and activities back in their individual districts/schools. DELT team members were expected to lead their schools/districts in having courageous conversations about race and student achievement. They were encouraged to use their Pacific Educational Group (PEG) training materials to provide professional development and other follow-up activities at their individual buildings.

It was acknowledged by Glenn Singleton and his associates that members of the DELT team sometimes found that they were more willing to engage others in conversation, first, informally and then formally. Furthermore, the more that they practiced, the more comfortable they became in imitating formal conversations with others. Teams were encouraged to use personal examples of how they have perpetuated a racial achievement gap and called on their staff to reflect on how they also might be doing so in order to guide staff members through the discovery of their own racial experiences and how they unconsciously bring them into the classroom. The ultimate goal of the DELT teams was an expression of a vision for change in which race no longer predicted student achievement.

In addition, DELT team members were charged with examining their district policies, practices, programs, structures, climate, and culture that may be barriers to equity and excellence and lead systemic change efforts that result in high levels of achievement for all students. They were responsible for aligning the Systemic Equity Transformation Framework with existing district strategic priorities and board goals, ensuring that all efforts were streamlined for optimal student achievement results.

During the second year of *Courageous Conversations About Race*, training seminars focused on developing a framework for systemic equity transformation. Some of the topics included: (a) Courageous Conversations and Courageous Leadership: Crafting the Framework for Systematic Transformation, (b) Culturally Relevant Teaching, (c) Courageous Conversation and Community Engagement, and (d) Sharing Equity Frameworks, and other Implementation Issues.

Throughout the past three years, *CC About Race* provided training and follow-up technical assistance to the DELT teams focused on deepening their understanding of race and equity, as well as on how to develop and then guide the implementation of the district's Equity Transformation Framework. Singleton and Linton (2006a) noted that central to achieving educational equity, is the development of a strong support for school and district leaders who serve as the guiding coalition to ensure successful systemic transformation.

DELT team members were reminded that they must be careful not to judge or jump to conclusions, make accusations, or assumptions. The use of the tools for *Courageous Conversations*, the agreements, the conditions, and the compass was reinforced. By definition, the conversations and dialogues, even the debates, were not truly “courageous” if not applied.

Engaging in courageous conversations about race was clearly not an institutionalized practice in schools (Singleton & Linton, 2006a). Without engaging in these conversations, educators were denying an essential prerequisite for addressing the very significant and difficult challenges we have in closing the racial achievement gap. Darling-Hammond (1997) stated that in order to create a cohesive community and a consensus on how to proceed, school personnel must have the occasion to engage in a democratic discourse about the real stuff of teaching and learning. Democratic discourse means providing enough time and space so that every educator's perspective and experience are listened to and affirmed (Singleton & Linton, 2006a).

Experience as a *Courageous Conversation About Race* Coach

In 2004, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the State Education Resource Center (SERC) designed an intentional program effort to address the issues of the state's over-representation of Black students in special education. The CSDE and SERC worked closely with Glenn Singleton, Executive Director of Pacific Educational Group, and eight school districts in a unique professional-development program entitled, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, designed to address what educators, families, and other community group members can do to improve teaching and learning across racial lines. In addition, the central purpose of the seminars was to guide participants in identifying and addressing policies and practices that negatively impact the ability of students to achieve rigorous academic performance across racial lines and what educators, families, and other community group members can do to address the issues.

Consultants from SERC served as CC Coaches. A majority of the districts participating in *CC About Race* were districts that SERC had already had some involvement in through various initiatives and projects (e.g., Least Restrictive Environment Initiative, Early Intervention Project, and Positive Behavior Support). In preparation of the *CC About Race's* seminars, SERC initiated an agency-wide professional-development training session entitled, *Beyond Diversity*, a two-day seminar developed and presented by the Founder and President, Glenn Singleton, of Pacific Educational Group in San Francisco, California, to assist CC Coaches in the provision of facilitation and follow-up technical assistance. *Beyond Diversity* is an introduction to *CC About Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006a).

The first year of *Courageous Conversations About Race* served as a planning year. Members of the District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) consisted of the superintendents and building level-principals who worked on building their capacity through professional-development seminars and intersession meetings, SERC Coaches, and other district focus groups. The goal of the DELT Teams was to guide staff members through discovery of their own racial experiences and how they unconsciously bring them into the classroom. The ultimate goal was an expression of a vision for change in which race no longer predicts student achievement.

Throughout the past 3 years, *CC About Race* provided training and SERC Coaches provided follow-up technical assistance to members of the DELT Teams focused on deepening their understanding of race and equity, as well as on how to develop and then guide the implementation of the district's Equity Transformation Framework. Singleton and Linton (2006a) noted that central to achieving educational equity is the development of and strong support for school and district leaders who serve as the guiding coalition to ensure successful systemic transformation.

Statement of the Problem

There is an over-representation of Black students in special education. Black students are usually referred for special education consideration by the end of the fourth grade. One intentional program effort to reduce the large number of referrals in Connecticut was *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Although various Connecticut schools have participated in *CC About Race* over the past 5 years (2004-2009), SERC and the CSDE were uncertain about its usefulness in changing the perceptions of teachers regarding race and referrals of students to special education.

Purpose of the Study

A qualitative study was used to examine the perceptions of general-education elementary teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to special education. The study intended to capture the perceptions of 16 general-education elementary teachers from three districts in Connecticut's District Reference Group H about the over-representation of Black students in special education. One-on-one interviews took place at individual schools for approximately 60 minutes per teacher.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

Research Question #1: How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education?

Research Question #2: How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*?

Research Design

Conducting a qualitative research study best suited the examination of elementary teachers' perceptions of why and how Black students are referred to special education. Qualitative research is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture, or lifestyles. Broadly defined, it means "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17) but instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived at from real-world settings where the

phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally (Patton, 2001, p. 39). Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena as they appear in natural settings (Patton, 2001). It is described as an umbrella concept covering an array of interpretative techniques to come to terms with meaning, not frequency, of natural phenomena in the social world.

Theoretical Framework

The literature on the over-representation of Black students in special education is growing. However, very few studies have applied a theoretical framework that explains the history and contextual influences that affect this problem and why it continues to exist. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a useful perspective from which to explore the concept of race as a social construct, and the ways this construct is used to maintain the relative privilege and power of the dominant group (Cook, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Dalton, 1995; Matsuda, 1995). Given the often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of Black students. Critical Race Theory (CRT) suggests that over-representation cannot be solved without carefully considering how the racism experienced by Blacks drives the process (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

According to Hilliard (1999), the knowledge and skills to educate all children already exist. However, the will of society to teach all children is questionable. He further asserted that because we have lived historically in an oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which denies their political origin and meaning.

CRT is an approach that seeks to transform the relationships that exist among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

This study discusses ways that engage five prominent tenets of CRT: Counter Storytelling, Permanence of Racism, Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and Critique of Liberalism to illuminate institutional policies, practices, and structures that promote racism and inequity in schools, specifically as they relate to the over-representation of Black students in special education.

Importance of the Study

The study provided a basis for the examination of current local and state policies, practices, and philosophies as they pertain to a culturally responsive educational system, an informed pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and professional development. Specifically, the results of this study assisted the CSDE in the focused-monitoring efforts of local public schools relative to over-representation of Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education. In addition, the results assisted SERC in the design of job-embedded and state-wide professional-development activities in order to be more responsive to the needs of local public schools in: (a) early intervening services, (b) cultural relevant instruction, and (c) the over-representation of Black students in special education.

Definitions of Terms

The following list of definitions defines the terms used in this study:

Black: A person having origins in any of the indigenous racial groups of Africa (Public Policy Research Institute, 2003). For purpose of this study, Black refers to African American, minority, and students of color.

Categories of Disabilities: Thirteen categories of disabilities as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The categories of disabilities are: intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, deaf-blindness, and developmental delay.

Courageous Conversations About Race: A means to examine philosophies, policies, procedures, and practices in districts, schools, and classrooms that reflect institutionalized racism. It is designed to address what educators, families, and other community group members can do to improve teaching and learning across racial lines.

Courageous Conversation utilizes four agreements: Stay Engaged, Experience Discomfort, Speak Your Truth, and Expect/Accept Non-Closure; 6 conditions: Focus on Personal, Local and Immediate, Isolate Race, Normalize Social Construction and Multiple Perspectives, Monitor Agreements, Conditions and Establish Parameters, Use a “Working Definition” for Race, Examine the Presence and Role of “Whiteness”; and the Courageous Conversation Compass—four primary ways people deal with racial information, events, and/or issues: Emotional, Intellectual, Moral, and Social, in order to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race (Singleton & Linton, 2006a).

Disproportionality: Disproportionality or over-representation can be conceptualized as:

1. Representation of certain groups of students at proportions significantly greater than their proportion in the general population (Gravois & Rosenfield, 2006).

2. The presence of students from a specific group in an educational program being higher or lower than one would expect based on their representation in the general population of students (Yates, 1998).

3. Students' representation in special education programs or specific special education categories exceeds their proportional enrollment in a school's general population (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998; Oswald et al., 1999; Tucker, 1980).

Oswald et al. (1999) best define disproportionate representation as "the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific education disability category" (p. 198). For the purpose of this study, disproportionate refers to proportions of minority groups that are higher or lower than proportions for the White group (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). Disproportionate representation includes both the over-representation and under-representation (Artiles & Zamora-Duran, 1997), and is also referred to over-representation.

District Reference Groups (DRGs): Groups of districts that have similar student and family background characteristics. The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) developed DRGs to assist in reporting and analyzing school district data. They are used in CSDE reports to place district resources into perspective. The state's 166 school districts and three academies have been divided into nine groups, based on indicators of socio-economic status, indicators of need, and enrollment.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): Special education and/or related services designed to meet the individual needs of each student at no cost to the parent, guaranteed to all students with disability by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997.

General Education: Education not specifically designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities (IDEA, 1997).

High Incidence Disabilities: Based upon the U.S. Department of Education's definition for low incidence disabilities, high incidence are those that occur in more than 100,000 persons. Examples of high incidence disabilities are speech and language impairments, learning disabilities, and mental retardation.

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): Also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), this federal law requires school districts to provide students with disabilities a Free Appropriate Public Education (IDEA, 1997).

Low-Incidence Disabilities: The United States Department of Education (2000) defines low-incidence disabilities as "those that occur in fewer than 100,000 persons" (pp. 11-21). Examples of low-incidence disabilities are deaf and blind impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, and multiple disabilities.

Mis-Classification: Mis-classification occurs in special education when a student is given a label of disability categorization that is inappropriate or incorrect.

Mis-Representation: Mis-representation occurs when a student is incorrectly and/or improperly placed in a special education program that is not specific to meet his or her individual needs, and who is removed from the general education classroom and placed in an inappropriate educational setting.

Office of Civil Rights: A governmental agency, which enforces several civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination in programs or activities that receive federal assistance from the Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Over-Identification: Over-identification is when more students are identified as disabled and receiving special education services than their proportional rate within the general population, they are considered to be over-represented in special education (Artiles et al., 2004; Harry & Klingner, 2007).

Over-Representation: For the purpose of this study, this term refers to the percentages of minority groups in special education that are higher than the percentage of the minority group in a school district's general population (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998).

Special Education: Instruction specially designed, at no cost to the parent, that meets the individual needs of students with disabilities, and confers a Free Appropriate Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Delimitations

The study participants were 16 fourth-grade general education teachers from the Connecticut District Reference Groups H: (a) School District A; (b) School District B; and (c) School District C. It was also limited to schools/districts that had participated in SERC program, *Courageous Conversations About Race Consortium*.

Limitations

A limitation of this study may consist of general education teachers being unaware of the changes (e.g., processes, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions) or having the ability to articulate those changes as a result of their school's/district's participation *Courageous Conversations About Race*. In addition, the generalization of the results may be limited in scope.

Assumptions

A major assumption was that there was a change in attitudes and behaviors of general education teachers as a result of their school's/district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. It was also assumed that each teacher interviewed was sufficiently knowledgeable and able to respond effectively to questions and provided his/her honest perceptions.

Organization of Study

The first chapter provides the background to the problem of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on the over-representation of Black students in special education, including a historical context: controversial and unresolved issue; intent of special education; what is disproportionate representation; and national trends. Chapter 2 concludes with assumptions. Chapter 3 describes the methods of this qualitative study. The results of the study are reported in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 consists of a summary of the study, delineating the conclusions and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The disproportionate representation of Black students in special education classes has been well established in the educational literature since the late 1960s (Deno, 1970; Dunn, 1968). For more than four decades, the over-representation and disproportionality of minority children in segregated special education classes has concerned researchers, educators, and parents (Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). Though a problematic issue throughout the United States of America, it is most noticeable among certain minority groups, namely Blacks (Marshall, 2001).

Hubbard and Mehan (1999) contend that racist attitudes and policies, both institutional and unsanctioned, held by politicians, school officials, or the American citizenry, have influenced the effectiveness of educational reform efforts. The U.S. Office for Civil Rights (1964) reported that disproportionate representation of Black students in special education programs results in significant racial segregation (pp. 1-44). This is a violation of human rights and federal legislation—Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin (pp. 1-42). However, racial bias and overtly racist practices remain an integral aspect of the special education process (Harry, 1994).

Legislation and litigation intended to prevent and arbitrate discrimination in education first came to notice in 1954 with the famous case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In *Brown*, the court ruled that it was illegal practice under the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to arbitrarily discriminate against any group of people. The court then applied this principle to the schooling of children, holding that a separate education for Black students is not an equal education. In this famous ruling, separate but equal would no longer be accepted (347 U.S. 483). The landmark case of *Brown v. Board* was the catalyst for dramatic changes in America's education system. It set the precedent for future discrimination cases in education. The Supreme Court decision struck down the long-held belief of "separate but equal schools" for Whites and Blacks and had a profound effect on where and how children are educated in America. The *Brown* decision was not only a pivotal case in the fight against racial discrimination, it also served as the vehicle for improving access to education for children with disabilities. Court cases were won and laws, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), were enacted to protect the rights of children with disabilities for a free and appropriate education.

The current literature on the over-representation of Black students in special education provides a foundation for understanding the extent of the problem. To that end, this chapter addresses three major themes emerging from the literature: (a) Historical Context, (a) National Trends, and (c) Assumptions related to the over-representation of Black students in special education.

A Historical Context of the Over-Representation of Black Students in Special Education

Legislation and Litigation

Evidence of a pattern of disproportionate representation has been sufficient to initiate a legal or policy action to reduce disproportionality. Racial and ethnic minorities are protected from discrimination in the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The over-representation of ethnic and linguistic minorities in special education has resulted in several well-known court cases. However, findings have been mixed when allegations of discrimination were based on over-representation (Coutinho & Oswald, 2004). Some of the significant court cases involving assessment and disproportionate placement of students in special education were:

1. *Hobson v. Hansen*. The *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967) case was filed against the Washington, D.C., Public Schools on behalf of Black students. The claim was that Black students were assigned in disproportionate numbers to low ability groups or tracks. The assessment instruments (aptitude tests) were determined to be inappropriate for use with Black students because they were primarily standardized on White middle-class students. The court invalidated the school system's educational tracking practices. Special classes were allowed as long as the procedures used in testing were rigorous with frequent reassessment (Sattler, 1988). Since this case, both ability grouping and standardized testing have come under judicial scrutiny (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1991).

2. *Diana v. State Board of Education*. *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) was a major court case in California that addressed the issue of over-representation and mis-classification in special education. It focused on the kinds of tests that were being

administered (e.g., verbal versus non-verbal) and the manner in which tests were administered (e.g., primary versus second language). In *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970), the California Department of Education agreed to the following: (a) to test all second-language students in both their primary language and English; (b) to eliminate unfair verbal items for assessment instruments; (c) to reevaluate all Mexican-American and Chinese students enrolled in classes for the Educable Mentally Retarded, using only nonverbal items, and testing them in their native language; and (d) to develop intelligence quotient (IQ) tests that reflect the culture of Mexican-American students and that are standardized only on Mexican-Americans.

3. *Mills v. Board of Education*. Concerns about ethnic equity were in fact central to litigation (e.g., *Mills v. Board of Education*, 1972) that led to the promulgation of the first special education legislation (P.L. 94-142, 1975). Since the passage of that act, issues of cultural fairness with respect to special education have continued to find their way into court, focused primarily on the use of intelligence testing with Black students (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

4. *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles*. In November 1979, Judge Robert F. Peckham, presiding Judge of the Federal District Court of Northern California, issued a landmark decision in the *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* case. Judge Peckham found that standardized tests of intelligence (IQ tests) were culturally biased against Black students and did not take into account their cultural and background experiences. The ruling stated that IQ tests could not be administered to Black students for purpose of placing them in special education classes for the Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR). Judge Peckham modified his judgment on September 25, 1986, issuing to the California State Department of

Education a statewide ban on the use of standardized IQ tests with Black students. The court stipulated that there was no special-education-related purpose for which IQ tests shall be administered to Black students. The pertinent issues addressed in *Larry P.* that arise in other court cases are: (a) tracking; (b) overrepresentation; (c) equity; (d) cultural awareness and sensitivity; (e) non-discriminatory assessment; and (f) services for students with achievement difficulties.

5. *PASE v. Hannon*. *PASE v. Hannon* (1980) litigation has often yielded very different conclusions in different courts. The court in *PASE v Hannon* concluded that there was no evidence that intelligence tests were biased against minorities.

In these cases the court did not find that reducing disproportionate representation per se was the appropriate remedy to ensure equal educational opportunity and improve the educational success of culturally and linguistically diverse students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 101-476) was first authorized in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and was recently reauthorized by the United States Congress in 2004. IDEA was designed to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education. To accomplish this goal, schools must have in place appropriate procedures to determine if the child who is referred for special education services is a child with disability and in fact requires special education and related services to achieve and progress appropriately in the school curriculum. Providing a free appropriate public education to qualified students with disabilities has been a challenging and often controversial endeavor. Of particular concern has been the overrepresentation of Black students in special education, specifically in particular regions

and states and in programs for mental retardation (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Dunn, 1968).

Critical Race Theory

The volume of literature is growing. However, very few studies apply a theoretical framework that explains the history and contextual influences that affect this problem and why it continues to exist. Critical Race Theory (CRT) suggests that overrepresentation cannot be solved without carefully considering how the racism experienced by Blacks drives the process (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, CRT implies that race should be the center of focus, and charges an individual to critique school practices and policies that are both overtly and covertly racist. Historical factors, such as slavery, oppression, inequity, and racist practices, are not easily changed. However, the pervasiveness of racism and its subtle ways are still prevalent in our country. The disproportionate number of Black students placed in special education has its roots in these issues (Hilliard, 1999).

Critical Race Theory (CRT), developed initially from the work of legal scholars Derrick Bell, Allan Freeman, and Richard Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), has been largely used in the area of legal research (Crenshaw, 1995). It focuses on the concept of race as a social construct, and on the ways in which this construct has been used to maintain the relative privilege and power of the dominant group (Cook, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Dalton, 1995; Matsuda, 1995). The goal of CRT is to illuminate racist practices and bring about social justice to oppressed people (Crenshaw, 1995).

The influence of CRT has expanded into other disciplines. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) are credited for introducing CRT to the education community nearly 10 years

ago and has since emerged as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research (Duncan, 2002; Lynn, Yosso, Solorzano, & Parker, 2002). The key theoretical elements of CRT are: (a) counter-storytelling, (b) the permanence of racism, (c) Whiteness as property, (d) interest convergence, and (e) the critique of liberalism.

1. *Counter-Storytelling*. As an essential tenet of CRT (Matsuda, 1995), Counter Storytelling focuses on telling a story that shines the spotlight on racism to counter accepted notions or myths held by members of the majority culture. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) define it as a method of telling a story that “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 144), exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counter-stories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority, therefore, serving as a means for giving voice to marginalized groups. Counter-storytelling helps an individual to understand what life is like for others and invites the reader into a new and unfamiliar world (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 41). In education, Solórzano and Yosso (2001) and Lynn et al. (2002) suggest that counter-stories can be found in various forms, including personal stories/narratives, other people’s stories/narratives, and composite stories/narratives.

2. *The Permanence of Racism*. “Racism is a permanent component of American life” (Bell, 1992, p. 13). The acceptance of the idea of the permanence of racism involves adopting a “realist view” of the American societal structure. Within a CRT framework, according to Bell (1995), a “realist view” requires realizing the dominant role that racism has played and continues to play in American society; this can be both a conscious and an unconscious act (Lawrence, 1995). This theory suggests that institutional racism is

embedded in the nation's culture, evident in the hierarchy of its governmental, financial, and educational institutions. Furthermore, the notion of the permanence of racism implies that racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains. Such structures allocate the privileging of Whites and the subsequent "othering" of people of color in all arenas, including education.

3. *Whiteness as Property*. Harris (1995) suggests that functions and attributes of property historically have been used in establishing Whiteness as a form of property. Whites have dominated the capitalist system since its inception. In America, Blacks were brought here as slaves and were considered property. The White power structure designed and operated an effective, oppressive economic system that kept Black powerless. When segregation was defeated in 1954, Whites, who were the heads of the public schools, used tracking and special education placement to maintain the status quo. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest that educational inequity exists because Whites have exclusive access to high quality and rigorous curriculum. Tracking, honors, and/or gifted programs and advanced placement courses are but the myriad ways that schools have essentially been re-segregated. The formal ways that selection and admission into these programs are conducted guarantee that students of color have virtually no access to a high-quality curriculum or certainly one that will prepare them for college attendance (Fine, 1991; Oakes, 1995; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002, 2004). Thus, through the myriad policies and practices that restrict the access of students of color to high-quality curricula, and to safe and well-equipped schools, school districts have served to reify this notion of Whiteness as property whereby the rights to possession, the use and enjoyment of, and the disposition of, have been enjoyed almost exclusively by Whites.

Many schools reinforce “Whiteness as property” through their policies and practices that regulated the manner in which students expressed themselves, either verbally or through their dress (Brady, Eitman, & Parker, 2000).

4. *Interest Convergence*. Bell (1980) suggests that civil rights gains within communities of color, and, specifically, those for Blacks, should be interpreted with measured enthusiasm. He argues that the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interest to do so. First, early civil rights legislation provided only basic rights to Blacks, rights that had been enjoyed by Whites for centuries. These civil rights gains were in effect superficial “opportunities” because they were basic tenets of U.S. democracy; however, Bell (1980) contends that these very basic rights came only inasmuch as they converged with the self-interests of Whites. Citing the limited and uncertain gains of the *Brown* decision, Bell articulated that losses in terms of human capital by way of the dismissal of scores of Black teachers and administrators, school closings in Black neighborhoods, and the limited access to high-quality curricula in the form of tracking, inflated admissions criteria, and other factors, have made the so-called “gains” from *Brown* questionable. In Bell’s shocking proposal regarding *Brown v. Board*, the triumph of civil rights litigation may have resulted more from the self-interest of elite Whites than the desire to help Blacks.

5. *Critique of Liberalism*. The last tenet of CRT is the critique of liberalism (Williams, 1997), as in (a) the notion of color blindness; (b) neutrality of the law; and (c) incremental change. Equal opportunity for all without favoritism is a desirable goal to pursue; however, given the history of racism in the U.S., rights and opportunities were both awarded and withheld based almost exclusively on race. Furthermore, the notion of

colorblindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the perception of people of color as Other. Colorblindness, as Williams suggests, has made it nearly impossible to integrate both the ways that White privilege is deployed and the normalizing effects of Whiteness. Hence, “difference,” in the colorblind discourse, almost always refers to people of color because being White is considered “normal.”

CRT scholars argue that colorblindness has been adopted as a way to justify ignoring and dismantling race-based policies that were designed to address societal inequity (Gotanda, 1991). The argument that society should be colorblind ignores the fact that inequity, inopportunity, and oppression are historical artifacts that will not be easily remedied by ignoring race in the contemporary society. Moreover, adopting a colorblind ideology does not eliminate the possibility that racism and racist acts will persist.

Under the notion of incremental change, gains for marginalized groups must come at a slow pace that is palatable for those in power. In this discourse, equality, rather than equity, is sought. In seeking equality rather than equity, the processes, structures, and ideologies that justify inequity are not addressed and dismantled. Remedies based on equality assume that citizens have the same opportunities and experiences. Race and experiences based on race are not equal, thus, the experiences that people of color have with respect to race and racism create an unequal situation. Equity, however, recognizes that the playing field is unequal and attempts to address the inequality. Hence, incremental change appears to benefit those who are not directly affected adversely by social, economic, and educational inequity that come as a result of racism and racist practices.

Special Education

Special education was mandated nationally by law in 1975 with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all individuals with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and mandates non-discriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities. Children are not to be identified as disabled because of poor achievement due to environmental disadvantage or ethnic, linguistic, or racial difference. This is made clear by the prescribed evaluation procedures and the definitions of disability conditions in IDEA. However, nationally, some ethnic groups continue to be over-represented as disabled, particularly as intellectual disabled (ID) and seriously emotionally disturbed (SED). State and local representation rates vary widely, but in many cases show even more marked patterns of over-representation (Oswald & Coutinho, 2001).

The intent of IDEA and other special education laws is and was to address the special and individual needs of students who do not appear to benefit from general education programs and services, including curriculum and instruction. It is to provide specialized services to students who require additional supports and different services beyond what is offered in the general education. In addition, IDEA was intended to both regulate and extend to all children, regardless of disability category and severity, and regardless of demographic variables (i.e., race, gender, income, or socio-economic status), the provision of educational services that are specific to their needs.

Losen and Orfield (2002) concur with Tucker (2002) that in its original and subsequent conceptualization, special education was not a place or location but rather a service-delivery structure. This service-delivery structure was supposed to provide individualized instruction to students who, on the basis of an objective referral, assessment and evaluation, eligibility determination, placement, and exit process, were identified as having disabilities (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005). Once students' needs were met, or appropriate strategies or modifications implemented, the students would be integrated into the general education settings. However, Losen and Orfield (2002) noted that, in reality, special education has not worked out as it was designed. Losen and Orfield further contend that for many Black students, special education has become a form of segregation from the mainstream—keeping students of color from receiving an equitable education in the general education environment.

Special education is criticized as being ineffective and that a stigma of the label is attached to children receiving services. The National Research Council (2002) noted that Black students identified as special education are often stigmatized socially. Patton (1998) added that students can be appropriately placed and fail to receive a quality and life-enhancing placement as a result (J. Patton, 1998, p. 25) of this stigma. In addition, students thus placed are likely to encounter a limited, less rigorous curriculum. Research has shown that the lower expectations can lead to diminished academic and post-secondary opportunities (Harry & Klingner, 2007; National Research Council, 2002). Furthermore, students in special education programs can have less access to academically able peers (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The negative implications that result from withdrawal from the general education services tend to outweigh these positive effects.

Harry and Anderson (1994) and Harry and Klingner (2007) assert that not much is “special,” different, or unique about special education. They further contend that what is “special” about special education has lost much of its appeal because Black students’ outcomes are the most disconcerting. The quality of Black students’ educational experiences has been regarded as one of the most significant issues faced by school systems in the past years (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000).

Disproportionality is a significant issue in special education because it often results in: (a) minority students being underserved or receiving services that do not meet their needs; (b) mis-classification or inappropriate labeling; (c) placement in special education as a kind of discrimination through school segregation; (d) a stigma associated with labeling; and (e) lowered expectations as well as a higher incidence for dropouts, suspensions, and expulsions that contribute to limited options for future success (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

The over-representation of Black students in high-incidence special education programs (e.g., intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance) has been a concern for more than four decades (Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968). The importance of this issue is evident in the fact that it has been studied twice by the National Research Council (NRC) (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller et al., 1982). However, in spite of two NRC reports, resolutions, statements, and actions from professional organizations, such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (CEC, 2002; Ishi-Jordan, 1997; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002), litigation (e.g., court case such as *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* and *Diana v. California State Board of Education*), policy and advocacy efforts (e.g., IDEA amendments, CEC

Institutes on Disproportionality), pressure from parent groups and researchers, the problem has not been resolved. The recent NRC report concluded: “Twenty years later, disproportionality in special education persists” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 1).

The issue of over-representation within special education has primarily affected Black males who are also classified as having a lower socio-economic status. Moreover, the high level of Black students placed in special education is due greatly to misunderstood cultural attributes and believed signs of aggression. For example, Watkins and Kurtz (2001) surveyed teachers and asked each to nominate difficult-to-teach students in need of a psychological evaluation and placement in special education from an equal group of White and Black students. The teachers referred Black students by a higher margin over their White students.

Currently, Blacks tend to be significantly over-represented in the two special education categories of mild mental disabilities and emotional/behavioral disabilities (Oswald et al., 1999). Black students account for only 14.8% of the general population of 6- to 21-year-old students, but they make up 20% of the special education population across all disabilities (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They are 2.41 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation, 1.13 times more likely to be labeled as learning disabled, and 1.68 times as likely to be found to have an emotional or behavioral disorder (Klingner et al., 2005).

The disproportionate representation of children of color in special education is a long-standing problem that continues to concern educators. The newly reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P.L.108-446) once again addresses the concern and requires states to take more aggressive steps to monitor and respond.

Nevertheless, despite national attention and controversy, there remains little consensus about how best to define and respond to patterns of over- and under-identification by ethnicity and gender across disability categories.

Connecticut Situation

Connecticut has struggled to address the over-representation of Black students in special education for many years. While the state's prevalence rates for identification of students in need of special education have declined during the past decade, there are proportional differences among Connecticut school districts within racial and ethnic segments of student populations. Specifically, Black and Hispanic/Latino students are more than twice as likely as their White peers to be identified with intellectual and emotional disabilities.

Losen and Orfield (2002) raised concerns about significant disproportionality in special education classification across the country, including Connecticut.

Disproportionality occurs when a racial, ethnic, or gender group is represented in special education at a significantly different rate than the group's proportional enrollment in the general school population. For example, nationally, Black students are 2.41 times more likely to be identified as having intellectual disabilities and 1.68 times more likely to be identified with emotional/behavioral disabilities than are White students (Blanchett, 2006), and these disparities remain even after accounting for socioeconomic differences between racial groups (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Similarly, in Connecticut, Black and Hispanic/Latino students are more than twice as likely to be identified with intellectual or emotional disabilities as are their White counterparts.

The Debate: A Controversial and Unresolved Issue

The debate of disproportionate representation of Black students in special education has persisted for the last four decades (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; National Research Council, 2002; Patton, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Disproportionate representation, or disproportionality, refers to the over- or under-representation of a given population group often defined by racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also defined by socio-economic status, national origin, English proficiency, and gender in a specific population category (Coutinho & Oswald, 2004). It clearly means that there is a specific group or demographic that has exceeded normal representation of any said group, and is therefore represented greater than it should be. Over-representation is an unresolved issue that continues to significantly impact the lives of children of color (Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968).

Disproportionate representation of Black students in special education has been attributed to a variety of circumstances including: racism that is engrained in our culture, the higher percentage of minorities in poverty, mono-culture schools that are not responding appropriately to our nation's growing diversity, and inherently inferior races (Artiles & Trent, 2000; Baca & Cervantes, 1998; Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Patton, 1998).

In 1968, Lloyd Dunn, the former president of the Council for Exceptional Children, addressed the over-representation of Black students in our special education programs in the article entitled, "Special Education for the Mildly Retarded: Is Much of It Justifiable?" He questioned the academic effectiveness and the detrimental social implications of special education. Dunn called for a change in the role of the special educator, to one that served as a consultant to general education teachers so that more

students with special needs could remain in the mainstream classroom. In addition, he disputed the need to label children, describing the negative effects these ‘badges’ cause (Dunn, 1968).

This debate over how special education services should best be delivered and the efficacy of labeling continues today. However, there has been a shift from merely citing the fact that Black students are disproportionately represented in special education to examining the reasons why this trend continues (Artiles & Trent, 2000; Patton, 1998; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

Despite the general level of concern, educators and researchers have sometimes argued that disproportionality should not be the focus of discussion. The National Academy of Sciences panel of experts regarded disproportionality as harmful when it resulted from inadequate regular education programs, inappropriate assessment practices, or ineffective special education programs. High-quality, effective instruction for all students in both general and special education could diminish the significance of over-representation. In addition, increasing the appropriateness of assessment practices would lead to the same decisions at the referral, assessment, and placement steps regardless of the race or ethnicity of the student given the same behaviors or symptoms. Consequently, some would contend that if emphasis were placed on improving instruction and expanding opportunities for all students and on fair and equitable determination of eligibility for special education, a case could be made that disproportionality should not be perceived as a problem (Westat, 2003).

On the other hand, working from a different conceptual framework, Patton (1998) has maintained that disproportionality itself is always a significant problem, with deep

sociopolitical and historical roots. From this perspective, factors that cause over-representation include the failures of the general education system, inequities in the referral, assessment and placement process, and the subjectivity of high-incidence disability categories. Similarly, Daniels (1998) has asserted that disproportionate representation is a significant problem, in and of itself, indicative of inherent inequities within our educational system that prejudice outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse students.

Although the presence of minority over-representation has been well documented and recognized as significant issues faced by the United States public schools (Coutinho & Oswald, 2004), it is a complex problem. Its causes have yet to be fully understood.

The *Twenty-Second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2000) documents the extent and seriousness of the problem: Black youth, ages 6 through 21, account for 14.8% of the general population. Yet, they account for 20.2% of the special education population. In 9 of the 13 disability categories (i.e., specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, and developmental delay), the percentage of Black students equals or exceeds the resident population percentage. The representation of Black students in the mental retardation and developmental-delay categories is more than twice their national population estimates. Meanwhile, Black students are less likely to be over-represented in four disability categories: (a) deaf/blindness, (b) orthopedic impairment, (c) other health impairment, and (d) visual impairment/blindness (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Poverty is often cited as an explanation for these disparities. However, while poverty and related factors correlate highly with the incidence of disability, the effects of gender and race remain significant even after controlling for socio-economic factors. Furthermore, the most striking finding in 2001, according to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was that Black students attending schools in districts serving mostly middle-class or wealthy White students were at an increased risk for being labeled intellectually disabled. In fact, Losen and Orfield (2002) reported that Black children, especially males, are at increased risk for identification in the categories of mental retardation and emotional disturbance than are members of the White population of a district.

The real problem of the over-representation of students of color in special education is that mis-categorization leads to mis-placement, and mis-placement leads to mis-instruction (Obiakor & Ford, 2002). Further, mis-instruction results in failure and ultimately a cycle of low expectations and frustration that begets more failure; a vicious cycle that contributes, ultimately, to in-school and post-school failure for a disproportionate number of students of color.

Teacher referral is a strong predictor of eligibility for special services. In fact, studies show that 73 to 90% of the students referred by classroom teachers for special education evaluations due to academic problems are found eligible for services (Harry & Klingner, 2007). A child's race and ethnicity significantly influence the child's probability of being mis-identified, mis-classified, and inappropriately placed in special education programs. Research shows the relationship between race and ethnicity and other variables for students' placement in special education classes. Variables such as language, poverty,

assessment practices, systemic inequities, and professional development opportunities for teachers have been cited as factors that play a role in disproportionate representation (Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council, 2002).

National Trends in the Over-Representation of Black Students in Special Education

The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), has documented the patterns of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs for more than 40 years. With each OCR survey, the following patterns have emerged: (a) Black students have been found to be over-represented in the high-incidence categories of mental retardation (MR) and emotionally disturbed (ED); and (b) Black students are under-represented in the gifted and talent category (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 2006).

Nationally, Black students constitute 35% of the total special education enrollments in the MR category, yet represent 17% of elementary and secondary student enrollments. Black students are 2.4 times more likely to be labeled MR than are White students and 26.4% of Black students are classified as ED, but are only 17% of the overall student population. No other groups are over-represented in the high-incidence disabilities of mental retardation and emotionally disturbed. Black students, especially males who engage in certain behaviors that represent artifacts of their culture, such as language (Ebonics), movement patterns (verve), and have a certain “ethnic” appearance, have been found to be over-referred for special education placement (Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2000).

Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) noted that Black students are disproportionately referred to and placed in the high-incidence special education categories of intellectual

disability, emotional or behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities. Once labeled as having disabilities and placed in special education, Black students make achievement gains and exit special education at rates considerably lower than do White students identified as having disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). These conditions exist even though the field of special education has moved toward more equitable treatment of students with disabilities by advocating for inclusive general education placement as common practice. Many Black students who are placed in the less subjective, low-incidence categories of developmental disabilities are educated in segregated, self-contained settings with little or no exposure or access to their non-disabled peers or to the general education curriculum (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), Blacks accounted for 16% of the student population; however, Blacks represented 32%, or double the current representation, of students with mental disabilities in special education. The fact that Blacks represent a larger percentage of special education than the general education population further substantiates the over-representation of Blacks within special education.

The National Research Council (NRC, 2002) updated its historic 1982 report on disproportionate representation of minority students and males in special education programs for students with intellectual disabilities. While describing significant changes that had taken place in two decades, most notably, a significant decline of prevalence rates in the intellectual disabilities category and significant increases in the prevalence of Blacks identified in the learning disabilities category, there was a continuance in the

overall disproportionate numbers of Black students identified as having intellectual disabilities.

A Harvard study (Losen & Orfield, 2002) found that African American students in Connecticut, Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Nebraska are more than four times as likely to be identified as mentally retarded as are White students living in those states. In Florida, Alabama, Delaware, New Jersey, and Colorado, the number of Black students identified as mentally retarded was more than three times the rate for White students. In a similar comparison of students by race, Losen and Orfield (2002) found that Black students in Nebraska were six times more likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed, and those in Iowa were four times as likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed as compared to their White counterparts. Black students in Kentucky, Montana, Utah, and Minnesota were three times more likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed whereas Black students in Louisiana, Washington, Oregon, West Virginia, and North Carolina were more than twice as likely as White students to be targeted for such special programs.

Losen and Orfield (2002) argue that despite an increase in civil rights protections and special education services over the past years, school districts nationwide continued to improperly and disproportionately place Black students in special education classes. The Harvard Study also found that a grossly disproportionate numbers of Black students were identified as eligible for services and were too often placed in isolated and restrictive educational settings.

Assumptions About the Over-Representation of Black Students in Special Education Programs

Disproportionality is considered one of the most complex issues in the field of special education (Skiba et al., 2003). It is a phenomenon neither explained simply nor understood easily. Numerous studies have been affected to determine reasons for this occurrence. Racism, poverty, assessment bias, language differences, pre-service teacher training, teacher expectations, and cultural behaviors are among the identified factors (Artiles, 2003; Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

However, among the conceptual factors that can influence disproportionate representation are issues that involve race (Hilliard, 2001) and its definition and significance; issues around culture, class, and gender oppressions; and issues around the definition of disability and the nature of difference (Artiles & Trent, 1994). At the same time, other conceptual and socio-cultural factors, like the individual and collective use of stereotypes and assumptions about marginalized groups, also contribute to the over-representation of students of color in special education (Steele, 1997).

In schools, systemic factors related to teacher effectiveness, biased perceptions about students, and even the opportunities students have, or have not had, to learn may influence over-representation in special education (Gadsden, 2001; Hale, 2001; Watkins, Lewis, & Chou, 2001). Additionally, the region of the country, the size of the school program, the services available, whether the school is in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, and the specific disability in question all have an influence on educational practices, the gathering and interpreting of data, and data-based decision-making. Inadequate and inappropriate referral, assessment, and evaluation procedures used either to refer students for possible identification of special education, or to determine their

placement in special education, contribute greatly to the large numbers of minority students in these programs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Patton, 1998).

Algozzine, Christenson, and Ysseldyke (1982) concluded that there is a socio-political context in which the referral to placement process operates. This socio-political context involves the role that teachers play in the disproportionate numbers of students of color in special education. Since there is a high probability that teacher referrals for psychological evaluation result in the placement of students into special education, Algozzine et al. (1982) contended that special education referrals are teacher-driven. This means that students identified with special needs are tested and subsequently placed in special education once a teacher initiates the process by making a referral (Algozzine et al., 1982; Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Labeling students as special education when they really are not leads to unwarranted services and supports. Mis-identified students are likely to encounter limited access to a rigorous curriculum and diminished expectations. More important, mislabeling students creates a false impression of the child's intelligence and academic potential. Harry and Klingner (2007) contend that once students are receiving special education services, they tend to remain in special education classes. Furthermore, students in special education programs can have less access to academically able peers (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Black students identified as special education are often stigmatized socially (National Research Council, 2002). In addition, disproportionality can contribute to significant racial separation (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Coutinho and Oswald (2004) noted that the mere fact that disproportionality is widely viewed as a problem reflects a general belief that the proportion of children who have a disability should be about the same across all race/ethnicity groups. This belief leads to the conclusion that if the proportion for one race or ethnicity group is substantially different from the proportion for another group, then the system for identifying children with disabilities is not working the same way across groups. The researchers further contend that if identification confers some benefit, or imposes some stigma, then the system is not only working differently, but it is discriminatory.

However, an alternative to this general belief has been proposed; it holds that the proportion of children who are identified as students with disabilities may be higher for a given race or ethnicity group because factors that cause disability are more common in that group. An often cited example suggests that Black students are over-represented among students with mental retardation because mental retardation is associated with poverty, and a greater proportion of African American students live in poverty, compared to other race or ethnicity groups (Skiba et al., 2003). Coutinho and Oswald (2004) indicated that most statements about the causes of disproportionality fall under one of these two positions: (a) disproportionality is the result of a system that works in a biased, discriminatory fashion; or (b) disproportionality is the result of social factors that lead to higher rates of disability in some groups.

Poverty and other socio-economic factors affect the incidence of disability among all ethnic groups and across all disabilities. Even with socio-economic factors considered, race and ethnicity remain significant factors in placing children in special education. Also, it is important to note that poverty itself does not automatically result in low learning

potential, as witnessed by a significant number of children and schools who “beat the odds” (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

Non-Biased Assessment

The assessment process has been controversial in the special education process. The disproportionate representation of Black students represents a central and continuing challenge for special education. Concerns about the issue reach back to earlier work done in the field of education (Dunn, 1968; Mercer, 1973). The belief that test bias was responsible for over-referral led to a massive exploration of test bias in the 1970s (Braden, 1999). Major court decisions have raised red flags, and resulted in mandates for the use of culturally responsive procedures and tools with Blacks and English Language Learners in special education eligibility decisions. Two California court cases largely shaped these regulations, namely *Diana v. State Board of Education* (1970) and *Larry P. v. Wilson Riles* (1979). Some of the most important outcomes of *Diana* include a mandate to test in students’ primary language, and use non-verbal tests and extensive supporting data in future placement decisions. A major outcome of *Larry P.* was a ban on the use of IQ tests for identification and placement purposes with Black students in California (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002).

Subjective and unreliable identification procedures have also been associated with the over-representation of African American males in special education. Teacher referrals along with testing are the primary measures used to identify whether or not a student is in need of special education services. Each of these measures poses unique challenges to the crisis of the frequent placement of Black students in special education. Both methods have questionable reliability and have been critiqued for their use. For example, the

Executive Committee of the Council for Child Behavior Disorders (1989) suggests that there are problems with the referral process as the initial screening procedure for identifying students for special education programs because it is insensitive to students with internalizing problems.

Hilliard (1990) and Cummins (1986) believed that biased referrals and misdiagnosis occur mainly in the “judgmental” categories of special education classifications. The two judgment categories are most commonly, severe emotionally disturbed (SED) and mild mentally retarded (MMR). According to Harry and Anderson (1994), diagnoses of these disabilities are essentially based upon subjective clinical judgment rather than verifiable biological criteria. It is also important to note that the two most common types of tests used in the diagnosis of behavioral or learning disabilities are intelligence tests and behavioral assessments. Critics of testing methods used as tools for placement of African American students into special education make several observations: IQ tests inevitably reflect the cultural knowledge base and cognitive orientation of its creator(s) and of the sample on which they have been standardized; expectations about students’ language skills are determined by the standard language of the majority; and education professionals are in need of specific training and interpretation of speech and language tests. Thus, the entire testing process appears to be biased, and students whose cultural and social experiences do not include information and skills tested by these instruments are placed at a disadvantage (Harry & Anderson, 1994). For this reason, the Board of Assessment and Testing (BOTA) concluded that the usefulness of IQ tests in making special education decisions needed to be reevaluated (Morrison, White, & Fever, 1996). Townsend (2002) argues that the tests have long been

considered unfair and biased against students from ethnic minority backgrounds, because they are based on the experiences of middle-class Americans.

The disproportionately large number of minority students placed in special education suggests that too many of the learning difficulties experienced by children of color may be explained as “something wrong with the child” that special education can “fix.” The problem is reduced to a discussion of technical issues related to presumed intrinsic child deficits, with little attention to contextual, historical, or institutional issues (Artiles, 2003; Artiles, Osher, & Ortiz, 2003; Daniels, 1998; Patton, 1998). Students of color tend to be frequently mis-identified, mis-assessed, mis-categorized, and mis-placed (Obiakor & Wilder, 2003).

The most recent National Research Council (NRC) panel (Donovan & Cross, 2002) concluded that evidence of bias in the referral to placement process was mixed, but that the process has sufficient shortcomings relative to ensuring that the correct students are being identified. Further, the panel contended that the entire process is weighted toward referral and placement only after a student has experienced failure, thus ensuring that child's problems will be relatively intractable by the time he or she is finally placed in special education.

The over-representation of Black students in special education is considered to be the result of special education referral, assessment, and eligibility processes. According to Oswald et al. (1999), instruments used to determine special education eligibility are culturally and linguistically biased. Losen (2002) found that evaluation instruments are filled with subjectivity. Ortiz (2002) noted that, over the years, procedures and methods have been suggested to comply with the directive for nonbiased assessment with ethnic,

linguistic, and culturally diverse populations. Ortiz contends that the focus has been generally on modified use of or alternatives to standardized tests, rather than specification of a comprehensive approach to non-discriminatory assessment (p. 1322). As a result, professionals have tended to view nonbiased assessment in a very simplistic form.

Pre-referral/early intervention surfaced in response to concerns about inappropriate identification and labeling of children for special education. The primary purpose of the various models of early intervention has generally been to differentiate students with disabilities from academic or behavioral difficulties, including inappropriate or inadequate instruction. In the models of early intervention, students who are persistently non-responsive to more intensive and alternative instructional or behavioral interventions over time are viewed as the most likely candidates for special education (Fletcher, Barnes, & Francis, 2002; Ortiz, 2002).

The educational system works on a wait-and-fail model. The assumption is that failure must be documented first to secure assistance for students with academic and behavior concerns (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Many students who demonstrate an indication for academic and behavior support in kindergarten or first grade are not provided with the early intervention. Donovan and Cross (2002) noted that currently there are not mechanisms in place to guarantee that students will receive adequate opportunities to learn through exposure to effective reading instruction or classroom management before they are identified as having a "within-child" problem.

Early interventions have been recognized as a response to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals to special education. The defining features of the pre-referral/early

intervention model include a preventive process, a team-based problem-solving approach, action-research orientation, and an intervention process that is centered on the enhanced success of students and teachers within the general education setting (Buck, Polloway, Smith-Thomas, & Cook, 2003; National Alliance of Black School Educators, 2002). Early intervention starts with a general education team that meets to discuss a teacher's concerns about a student and to suggest strategies that he/she should implement within the general classroom before a student can be considered for referral to special education services (Losen, 2002). Most of the solutions proposed to eliminate disproportionality address the provision of appropriate and preventive intervention for students who are experiencing difficulty in school and improving teacher training in working with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Issues regarding identification or over-identification of students with disabilities can emanate not only from bias in tests, but from the attitudes and perceptions of the school personnel who make decisions about the children referred for testing. Duffy, Salvia, Tucker, and Ysseldyke (1981), in their discussion of nonbiased assessment, state that there is far more evidence that the use of test data has been the biasing factor rather than the tests themselves. Steele, Perry, and Hilliard (2004) noted that categorical views of intelligence as a measurable construct affect the way teachers and schools think about students. Deeply held assumptions about inferior intelligence among students of color represent one of the most enduring legacies of Western racism. Furthermore, Steele et al. feel that these beliefs have been institutionalized in the policies and practices of our public schools. Biased assessments and other evaluative data gathered and interpreted by educators, including unconscious stereotypical attitudes, are factors contributing to the

lack of appropriate instruction and positive outcomes for students of color (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Hilliard, 2000).

Daugherty (1999) further states that social patterns are often more effectively stronger than legislation addressing change. Two of the patterns that cannot be changed by legislation are attitudes and perceptions. While it can be argued that attitudes are not always overtly demonstrated, beliefs and perceptions can, and do, influence interpretation and use of data in identifying students for special education, and certain stigmatizing categories in particular. Decisions made to provide students with perceived necessary services are sometimes influenced by what Losen and Orfield (2002) refer to as “unconscious bias.”

In this vein, evidence from a 3-year ethnographic study in Florida (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002) points to the many ways in which the assessment process is influenced by unofficial, undocumented practices. These include informal pressures from school administrators and/or referring teachers, teachers' and psychologists' unacknowledged biases regarding children's family structures and practices, and widely varying choice and implementation of psychological assessment tools. Furthermore, the Harry et al. study revealed that child study teams seldom take into account information regarding the atmosphere and practices obtained in the classrooms of referring teachers. In the study, several children were referred from classrooms where very poor instruction and classroom management were the norm, making it impossible to know whether the children's difficulties might have been mitigated in more effective classroom environments.

The National Research Council (Donovan & Cross, 2002), in concluding its consideration of assessment issues, called for a focus on children's intervention needs rather than a search for intrinsic disability, and for an end to the requirement for IQ tests as a "primary criterion" for eligibility (p. 313). This report also emphasized that children's academic achievement falls along a continuum, and the cut-off points for "disability" or "giftedness" are "artificial and variable" (p. 26).

Teacher Expectations of Black Students

The literature on teacher expectations for Black students has a long history. R. Ferguson (2002) summarized research on achievement gap, frequently finding that teachers often focus on students' deficits. These deficits are either perceived or real. Ferguson's premise is that perceptions and behaviors held by educators increase referrals and the subsequent placement of Black students in special education. All too often, educators interpret differences as deficits, dysfunctions, and disadvantages within students and their cultures (Harry & Klingner, 2007). As a result, many Black students are referred to special education rather than gifted education (Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006).

Ninety percent of United States public school teachers are White. Most of them grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003). Researchers (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002) contend that many White educators have not acquired the necessary experimental and education background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students.

Research has shown that the lower expectations of students of color can lead to diminished academic and post-secondary opportunities (Harry & Klingner, 2007; National Research Council, 2002). According to Gay (2000) culturally responsive teachers of Black students have high performance expectations, advocate for their students, and empower them, as well as use good instructional practices. Gay described these teachers as demanding, supportive, encouraging, pedagogically persistent, and intellectually focused (p. 64). These culturally responsive teachers interacted with students on multiple levels concerned with personal and academic development.

It is critical that teachers examine and change their basic assumptions and beliefs about students of color. Teachers must believe that all children can learn regardless of their ethnic group, gender, or social class (Banks, 1992; Collins, 2002). Howard (2007) emphasizes the critical need for educators of all racial and cultural groups to develop new competencies and pedagogies to successfully engage students in our ever-changing diverse student populations.

According to Edmonds and Frederiksen (1979), to be truly effective, a school/teacher must challenge all students, and must close the achievement gap between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, Edmonds and Frederiksen noted that high expectations for students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, and effective family/community involvement are the cornerstones of effective-schools research. He maintains that schools must have a climate of high expectations reflected in staff and family beliefs, and must demonstrate that all students can attain mastery of the essential content and school skills.

Effective instruction and improved student outcomes begin with the teacher. Researchers Brophy and Good (1986), upon review of numerous studies about teacher impact on student achievement, concluded that the myth that teachers do not make a difference in student learning has been refuted (p. 370). More recent studies note that the individual classroom teacher has an even greater effect on student achievement than originally thought (Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Reeves (2006) cites an earlier study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) that hypothesizes the “Pygmalion Effect,” supporting the notion once again that when teachers expect more, they get more. However, high expectations alone are not enough. High expectations must be accompanied by effective, explicit instruction in relevant curricular domains.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Effective Instructional Practices

Gay (2000) defines culturally relevant teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of the students. Culturally relevant teaching: (a) acknowledges students’ cultural heritage as it affects their dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning, and recognizes that it contains content worthy to be included in the curriculum; (b) builds meaning between students’ home and school experiences as well as “school stuff” and the students’ lived realities; (c) uses of a wide variety of instructional strategies; (d) teaches an appreciation of the students’ own cultural heritage as well as that of others; and (e) incorporates multicultural information, resources, and materials in all subjects and skills routinely taught in schools. Culturally relevant teaching is culturally validating and affirming (Gay, 2000).

Culturally responsive teachers specifically acknowledge the need for students to find relevant connections among themselves, the subject matter, and the tasks they are asked to perform (Montgomery, 2001; Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). They know that students learn best when their experiences and interests serve as the basis for curriculum connections, making learning relevant to their lives (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Delpit (1995) helps to expand these concepts by asserting that culturally responsive teachers must explicitly teach skills and cultural capital, or, in other words, the knowledge and behaviors valued as being of high status by the dominant culture. Nieto (1999) describes the expertise of culturally responsive teachers in instruction and management and their ability to challenge and simultaneously support their students.

Culturally responsive teachers feel a strong sense of responsibility for all students, including students referred for or already placed in special education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Villegas and Lucas assert that unless teachers behave in the culturally responsive manner, their students may be mis-educated and underachieve, not because they have internal deficits and should be in special education, but because they have not been taught in ways that promote their learning.

Patton (2001) suggested that a new category of disability should be created that more appropriately describes one of the major factors contributing to the perpetuation of disproportionality. A new category of disability, called “ABT,” translates into “ain’t been taught.” A host of researchers, among them Irvine (1990), Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (2001), and Ford (1992), has documented that many Black students find their way into special education by the mere fact of *not having been taught* (Patton, 2001). Reducing

over-representation is a matter of creating a successful school environment for all students and accurately distinguishing disabilities from cultural differences (Burnette, 1998).

Cummins (1986) asserted that schools and teachers have traditionally failed to honor African-American heritage and culture by not acknowledging multiple perspectives and diverse cultures in curriculum and instruction. This approach dis-empowers students rather than empowering them through validation of their cultural heritage (Banks, 1992). Culturally responsive teachers developed the dispositions that support all students' learning and are knowledgeable and skilled in implementing effective instructional practices. Gay (2000) describes such teachers as cultural organizers, mediators, and orchestrators of social contexts. To act in such a manner requires conscious attention to the ways in which students interact among themselves as well as with teachers.

Ladson-Billings (1994) noted that if teachers are to be effective, they need to be prepared to teach children who are not White as well as White children. Providing children with an equitable and effective pedagogy demands that teachers use the language and understandings that children bring to school to bridge the gap between what students know and what they need to learn. These teachers help their students to build bridges between their home and school cultures, recognize and understand differences in the social milieus, and build on the knowledge and skills that their students bring with them to school learning. In doing so, teachers demonstrate their care, respect, and commitment to each student's learning abilities, desires, and potentialities.

Kuykendall (2004) makes the argument that minority students must be exposed to instructional strategies that increase their understanding. Such strategies as understanding

how culture impacts the way a student learns, understanding the importance of learning styles, and understanding the role of differentiating instruction for minority youths can lead to increased student achievement. By incorporating a variety of culturally relevant strategies, educators can effectively respond to and instruct minority youths.

A critical piece of effective instruction and part of IDEA 2004 requirements is consideration of the diversity of the student population and providing teaching/pedagogy that recognizes and takes into consideration cultural differences within the classroom. Teachers have to develop culturally relevant instructional strategies and transform information about home and community into effective classroom practice. Gay (2000) affirms that a teacher's experience and background of knowledge of various cultures is critical to the teaching of students of color. Ladson-Billings (1990) discusses the importance of a teacher linking schooling and a student's culture. She makes the point that if a student's language, culture, heritage, and experiences are valued, used, and incorporated into the classroom, students are more likely to experience success.

Culturally relevant educational systems instill ethics of care, respect, and responsibility in the professionals who serve culturally and linguistically diverse students. These systems have a transformative goal in all their activities and nurture the creation of school cultures that are concerned with deliberative and participatory discourse practices (Gay, 2000). Culturally relevant educational systems create spaces for teacher reflection, inquiry, and mutual support around issues of cultural differences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas, 1991).

Gay (2000) contends that culturally relevant teaching makes academic success a non-negotiable mandate for all students and an accessible goal. It reveals the truth of how

minority students learn best in educational settings. Gay further acknowledges that teachers, not students, are lacking in truly understanding or valuing diversity in the classroom.

Nieto (1999) argues that, in spite of promising research, a serious problem of perception remains as culturally responsive pedagogy sometimes is based on the static view of culture that may even verge on the stereotypical. Attempts to be culturally responsive may be applied or implemented in ways that defeat the purpose, and the result is that entire cultures are identified by a rigid set of characteristics. Nieto (1999, p. 70) warns that it is therefore necessary to look beyond cultural responsiveness alone to help explain student academic success in light of the impact of structural inequalities with which so many students contend on a daily basis.

Tatum (2005) contends that effective teachers of Black students understand that they must go beyond the basic reading, math, and writing lessons. Furthermore, focusing only on skills and strategies does little to address the turmoil that many Black youths experience in America, and it may do little to improve their reading achievement. In addition, Tatum believes that addressing the academic needs of Black students requires that teachers integrate knowledge from several fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and social work in their instruction. Doing so is their best chance to avoid instructional practices that inadvertently contribute to the turmoil and instructional approaches that Black students may resist.

Effective Culturally Appropriate Classroom Management

Racial disproportionality in school disciplinary practices has a long history and still continues today (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson,

2002; Townsend, 2000). Evidence persists of disproportionality in school disciplinary practices by race, economic status, gender, and disability category. For example, consider these points: (a) Students of color have higher rates of office referrals, suspensions and expulsions from school (Cartledge et al., 2002); (b) Low income Black males receiving special education services have the highest suspension rates of any subgroup (Skiba et al., 2003); (c) Black males are more likely to receive more severe punishment than White students do for the same type of behavior (Cartledge et al., 2002); and (d) Students of color with disabilities are 67% more likely to be removed from school by a hearing officer on the grounds that they were dangerous during the 1999-2000 school year than their White peers (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002).

Research shows that exclusionary practices, such as suspension or expulsion, are not effective in reducing problem behaviors. In fact, the use of suspension is linked with increased school drop-out rates and juvenile incarceration (Skiba et al., 2003). Of particular concern, rigid discipline systems, such as zero-tolerance rules, may inadvertently promote lower tolerance for cultural differences. This, in turn, can increase discipline-related referrals and restrictiveness of placements of culturally diverse students.

Black students are often viewed as being hostile in the education sphere and non-compliant (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). There are social context clues that many educators mis-interpret. Watkins and Kurtz acknowledge that the issue of discrimination from White teachers toward Black students exists and is a problem. Many times Black students are mis-understood through their body language and comments. Some educators believe that when a Black child is talkative or outspoken, he or she has a behavior problem,

which leads to issues of over-representation (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Similarly, Losen and Orfield (2002) noted that Black students who are viewed as having challenging behaviors are referred more often for special education programs serving children with emotional disabilities. These students usually receive special education services under the mental retardation category.

Hilliard (1992) noted that mis-understanding of cultural behaviors has been shown to lead to errors about children's intellectual potential, which results in mis-labeling, mis-placement, and mis-treatment of children. Teachers often perceive Black students from working or low-income backgrounds as incapable of high quality academic work (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Furthermore, research has also shown that many teachers make their special education referral decisions primarily on the extent to which they believe a child is "teachable" or non-threatening (Hale-Benson, 1982; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Kunjufu, 1986).

Tatum (2005) articulated a need for a clearer understanding of how placement truly affects the student and the student's family. Placing a child in special education and giving a child a label irresponsibly can be detrimental. Tatum further contends that the placement within special education, contrary to belief, can be very beneficial, if in fact the services are needed. However, placing a child in special education, based on a few signs of disruptive behavior, is dangerous and a mistake. Patton (1998) maintains that it has been well documented that Black students, particularly males, are over-represented both in disciplinary practices and in certain special education categories and typically receive their special education services in segregated classrooms or buildings.

In discussing his own experience in working with Black students in Chicago, Illinois, classified as behaviorally "out of control" with learning disabilities, Tatum (2005) reported that many of the students did have some behavior issues. However, being labeled as out of control was far too extreme. Many of the teachers misread cultural attributes as signs of defiance and inappropriate behavior. In addition, the same teachers had so many preconceived notions about the students that it made their efforts highly ineffective. Tatum expressed that these same teachers lacked an understanding of diversity and multiculturalism, and many lived in either an upscale neighborhood or were from a small community.

The contributing factors of racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline have not been conclusively determined. Although it has been argued that disproportionality in school punishments is primarily a function of poverty (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2000), race remains a significant predictor of suspension and expulsion, even when socio-economic status is controlled in multivariate analyses (Skiba et al., 2002; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982). Any racial differences in reasons for suspension that have been found suggest that African American students receive more-severe punishments for less-serious infractions (Shaw & Braden, 1990) or are referred to the office more frequently for more subjective reasons, such as disrespect or loitering (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Other explanations for disciplinary disproportionality include the possible misinterpretation by classroom teachers of culturally based behaviors (Townsend, 2000) or stereotypes regarding Black males that increase the likelihood of office referral (Ferguson, 2001). Teachers and students often come from different cultural backgrounds,

which results in different learning styles and divergent views about appropriate classroom behavior (Kea & Utley, 1998). Townsend (2000) noted that while schools have meticulously designed behavioral norms that require conformity, passivity, quietness, and individualized competitive participation during teacher-focused instructional activities, some Black students are accustomed to performing multiple tasks simultaneously and may therefore prefer to work with others during instructional tasks (Townsend, 2000). As a consequence, this conflict in orientation may result in teachers perceiving students as being insubordinate, disrespectful, or inappropriate and in need of disciplinary actions (Ishi-Jordan, 1997).

Townsend (2000) argues that school districts can engage in a variety of actions to address the disproportional use of exclusionary disciplinary practices with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She contends that school districts and educators need to examine their behavioral expectations in terms of cultural biases and their usefulness in contributing to a safe, positive, and supportive learning environment that respects and affirms student diversity. In addition, educators need to examine their culturally based viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors and recognize how their cultural beliefs may conflict with the cultural beliefs of their students (Obiakor, 1999; Thorp, 1997).

Many researchers have emphasized that personal and cultural norms are inextricable from decisions about which behaviors are acceptable, to whom, and under what circumstances (Cartledge et al., 2002; Obiakor & Ford, 2002; Townsend, 2000). Norms regarding what behaviors are considered appropriate vary across cultures, and yet

school personnel tend to judge students' actions through narrow, White, mainstream lenses.

In terms of formal assessment of children's behaviors, even the application of well-designed rating scales cannot exclude subjectivity in judgment and, in many states, final judgments rely on projective testing, a set of procedures that have been the subject of much debate related to unreliability and subjectivity (Gresham, 1993; Motta, Little, & Tobin, 1993). The ambiguity of the process is exacerbated by historical racist beliefs and practices (Children's Defense Fund, 1975) reflected in a "punishment paradigm" (Maag, 2001), which includes zero-tolerance policies, corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion. These strategies target African American students at disproportionately high rates (McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Huang, 1992; Skiba, 2002) and contribute to their over-representation in disproportionately segregated programs for emotional disturbance (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1986). The combination of historical racism and extremely ambiguous definitions, policies, and practices places the most vulnerable students at increased risk of inappropriate labeling and isolation.

Teacher Relationship and Rapport With Students

In an interview with Sparks (2004, p. 49), Tatum stated that critical to the academic success of students of color is having quality relationships with their teachers and the other adults in school. In *Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) examined the unique characteristics of teachers identified as effective with Black students. She reported that a key characteristic of the culturally responsive teachers she interviewed was their ability to cultivate relationships and get to know their students beyond the boundaries beyond the classroom. Research studies on Black students' perspectives have

supported Ladson-Billings, documenting that teacher-student relationships are a critical factor in students' achievement (Gay, 2000).

Ferguson (2003) noted that content, pedagogy, and relationships affect how well ethnic and racial minority students learn. He contends that research has found that students' relationships with their teachers differ by their backgrounds and affect their overall academic achievement. Sather and Henze (2001) concluded that understanding the students who walk within the hallways of schools is as important as the level of skills each one brings with him or her. Building positive relationships can be linked to increased student achievement. Schools can improve racial relations between principals, teachers, parents, students, and the community by building bridges across the great racial gap, thus implying the importance of reaching and developing strong interpersonal relationships before teaching (Sather & Henze, 2001). The concept of caring has long played a key role in making connections and reaching Black students. It allows educators time to gain insights into the background and lives of the students they serve. This form of individual and cultural examinations leads to stronger ties to improve human relationships and increase student achievement.

Patton (1998) noted that in order for the special needs of students to be prioritized, educators and/or professionals must be familiar with the cultural and linguistic background of all ethnicities. Kea and Utley (1998) noted that many students of color do not succeed in school because their cultural, social, and/or linguistic characteristics are unrecognized, misunderstood, or devalued. Kea and Utley further stated that the continuing problems of Black students in special education programs are due to the fact of teachers not knowing them on a personal and social level.

Summary

The disproportionality of minority students in special education has been a persistent and complex issue (Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Tucker, 1980). While disproportionality has been well studied, there are no definitive answers as to why it occurs (Donovan & Cross, 2002). There is an increased need for researchers to shift their focus to solutions—the conditions as to how disproportionality occurs and why it continues (Skiba et al., 2003).

The issue of the over-representation of Black students has been viewed for many years as a “special education” problem. However, this issue cannot reside solely within the purview of special education (Dunn, 1968; National Research Council, 2002). It is a symptom of a larger systemic issue that needs to be viewed through the lenses of general education. The special education process usually begins with the general education teacher. Teacher referral is a strong predictor of eligibility for special services (Harry & Klingner, 2007).

Villegas and Lucas (2002) noted that when general education teachers feel that they are unable to meet the academic and social/emotional needs of students, or when a student may not conform to the norms of the class/school, teachers often turn to special education as a resource that is consistently and readily available. The over-representation of minority students in special education is a complex phenomenon, as well as a complicated issue, compounded by many factors (Artiles & Trent, 2000).

The 2002 National Research Council report recommended that in order to remedy the disproportionality of minority children in special education, changes such as early intervention, teacher training, better assessment, and behavior management strategies

would need to be implemented. The report further noted that schools would first need to recognize and acknowledge the racial root of the issue. The disproportionate number of Black students placed in special education is considered as having its roots in historical factors, such as slavery, oppression, inequity, and racist policies and practices in schools that are both overtly and covertly racist (Hilliard, 1999). The overall pervasiveness of racism and its subtle ways is still prevalent in our country. Hilliard (1995) noted that race matters in society and in our schools. He argues that educators must examine their personal beliefs and practices and engage in anti-racism for the benefit of all students.

Systems change is a difficult undertaking in any organization, even when it does not involve an emotionally laden issue such as race (Skiba et al., 2003). Fullan (2001) maintains that effective leaders of change establish a moral purpose. He further makes the point that educational change is technically simple, socially complex, and never a checklist. There is not a step-by-step shortcut to transformation. It involves the hard day-to-day work of reculturing. In addition, Tucker (2002) noted that change should be systemic and data-based. However, he stresses that instead of a school professional changing his/her behavior, the individual often changes only his/her rhetoric.

Villegas and Lucas (2002) noted that there is a need for educators to develop the commitment and skills to act as agents of change. Similarly, Fullan (1999) views change agency as a moral imperative. Educators are considered as moral individuals whose job is to facilitate the growth and development of other human beings, especially children. Villegas and Lucas (2002) contend that students depend on educators to have their best interest at heart and to make sound educational decisions. Villegas and Lucas further

articulated that educators have an obligation to do all they can to fulfill these expectations and to do so for all children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There is an over-representation of Black students in special education. Students are usually referred to special education by or during the fourth grade by general education teachers. One effort to reduce the large number of referrals in Connecticut elementary schools is *Courageous Conversations About Race*. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of general education teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students were referred to special education. This study described how teachers' attitudes and behaviors changed as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*.

The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education? (b) How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*?

Qualitative Methods

A qualitative research study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of fourth-grade general education teachers and about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to

special education. Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena as they appear in natural settings (Patton, 2001). Qualitative research tends to study situations and objects intact. In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument that engages the situation and makes senses of it (p. 34). Another feature of qualitative study is that it is interpretive. This includes not only the ability to explain why something is happening but the meaning of the experience for those involved in the situation (Eisner, 1991). In addition, voice, or expressive language, is evident in text. Using subjects' own words becomes part of the evidence in the researcher's quest for understanding. Qualitative research is characterized by its thick descriptions of the data, which often include interview transcripts.

This qualitative study intended to capture the perceptions of general education elementary teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education. These data enabled me to further clarify the problems related to the subject of the study and answer the research questions.

Self as the Researcher Instrument

I came to this research experience with much interest and enthusiasm. I am a Black male originally from South Carolina on a journey of increased racial consciousness and becoming an anti-racist leader. This journey began in 2003, when SERC initiated an agency-wide professional development training session entitled, *Beyond Diversity*, a two-day seminar developed and presented by the Founder and President, Glenn Singleton, of Pacific Educational Group in San Francisco, California. *Beyond Diversity* is an introduction to *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006a). One

of the conditions of *CC About Race* is to “establish a racial context that is personal, local, and immediate” (p. 73).

The first day of the training, Mr. Singleton asked participants to consider, “To what degree does race impact my life?” I recalled having a difficult time completing this activity. I have never considered the impact of race in my life. So, I thought that my life was impacted by race only about 50% of the time. Mr. Singleton proceeded with his presentation by discussing with the group numerous experiences that illuminated the fact that race impacts every aspect of my life, 100% of the time. After the discussion, it was clear to me that when I chose 50% to represent the impact of race in my life, 50% actually represented my own *racial consciousness* rather than the degree that race impacts my life (Singleton & Linton, 2006a, p. 76).

Mr. Singleton discussed with the SERC staff that, “because people are defined by their racial identity in this society, race is constantly present and having an impact on your experience and perspective” (Singleton & Linton, 2006a, p. 76). With that being said, “race disappears only when you no longer have your skin, and thus, the omnipresent skin that you are in defines your omnipresent racial impact” (p. 76).

As the training progressed over the 2 days, the group participated in another activity regarding the role and presence of “Whiteness.” Throughout the training, it became apparent that I was not conscious of the role and presence of “Whiteness” in my life. Essentially, I identified more with the White culture than with Black culture. I thought that as a Black man from the South, I should have been more racially conscious and identified more with people of color. As the result of the 2-day training and other follow-up activities, I frequently consider the role and presence of “Whiteness” in me and

in my life and the impact of race in my life. My journey of increased racial consciousness and becoming an anti-racist leader began as a result of the training.

I later realized that the real work of *CC About Race* lies in the will and ability of participants to participate in racial self-examination. One of the guiding principles of *CC About Race* is the belief that racial equity transformation begins with an individual at a personal level: keeping it personal, local, and immediate. Participants are asked to use “I” and/or “me” instead “they and/or them” when speaking. It is easier to judge and examine the attitudes and behaviors of others, but not ourselves. *CC About Race* has taught me to focus on personal, local, and immediate in order to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race.

CC About Race is a learning experience that provides an opportunity to dialogue openly about racial perspectives and their impact on student achievement. *CC About Race* provided SERC staff with an understanding of the four agreements: (a) Stay Engaged; (b) Experience Discomfort; (c) Speak Your Truth; and (d) Expect/Accept Non-Closure; and conditions: (a) Focus on Personal, Local, and Immediate; (b) Isolate Race; (c) Normalize Social Construction and Multiple Perspectives; (d) Monitor Agreements, Conditions, and Establish Parameters; (e) Use a “Working Definition” for Race; and (f) Examine the Presence and Role of “Whiteness” that is necessary in order to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race (Singleton & Linton, 2006a). Through the prism of race, SERC has utilized *CC About Race* as a means to examine its own philosophies, policies, structures, and practices.

SERC is committed to improving the achievement of all of Connecticut’s children and youth and to eliminating the racial predictability of our state’s achievement gaps.

Since 2003, SERC has worked to shed light on race and racism in education, studying the intersection of race and culture with educational achievement, special education, and student outcomes and success. SERC staff members have explored institutionalized racism and how the maintenance and perpetuation of differential distributions of power and privilege in schools result in significant disparities in educational outcomes between students of color and their White peers.

SERC has also established in-house professional development and structures to support its employees in their personal and professional journeys. By engaging in conversations about race and racism, employees heighten their awareness and deepen their knowledge about concepts and realities that might remain unconscious and/or about which people usually avoid talking. Both inside and outside the workplace, SERC staff members often find themselves considering their new insights about racial equity in their conversations, interactions, and activities.

My participation in *CC About Race* has increased my own racial consciousness. I am now more aware of the impact of race in my life. On a daily basis, my racial awareness and consciousness continue to grow. I also continue to grow and develop as an anti-racist leader. I am now viewing my life and experiences through a different set of lenses. As I progress on my journey as an anti-racist leader, I am finding myself more and more concerned about the over-representation of Black students in special education.

During my 12 years at SERC, I have had the opportunity to participate in the planning of a state-level summit to examine the issues of over-identification and disproportion of minority students in special education in Connecticut, while simultaneously addressing the achievement gaps in order to ensure success for all

students. The Summit was entitled, *Closing the Achievement Gaps: Connecticut Summit on Over-identification and Disproportion in Special Education*. I worked closely with George A. Coleman, Former Deputy Commissioner of Education (CSDE), to coordinate and design professional development activities to focus the state's attention on issues regarding the achievement of Black and Hispanic/Latino students, in particular Black and Hispanic/Latino male students. These activities have included the following: (a) Black Men's Forum; (b) Connecticut State Department of Education/SERC Book Study entitled, *Teaching Reading to Adolescent Males*; and (c) 2-day conference addressing the achievement of Connecticut's Black and Hispanic/Latino male students.

Purposeful Sampling

The sample used in this study was purposefully selected. In purposeful sampling, the researcher intentionally selected individuals to learn or understand the central phenomenon. Groups, individuals, or settings for study were based on their likelihood that the processes being investigated occurred (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) was used to select participants who were informationally rich and able to provide useful information for addressing the research questions (Patton, 2001).

Teachers in this qualitative study included a total of 16 fourth-grade general education teachers from three school districts that participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversation About Race*. All teachers participating in this study were from three school districts with similar demographics located in Connecticut's District Reference (DRG) Group H (see Table 1). The school districts had been identified by the Connecticut State Department of Education as having disproportionate numbers of Black

Table 1

Characteristics of Participating School Districts

	School District A	School District B	School District C
Student Enrollment	7,459	6,372	3,992
Free and Reduced Lunch	3,356	2,752	2,199
PK-12 Students Who Are Not Fluent in English	479	470	383
PK-12 Students Receiving Special Education in District	1,058	634	574
American Indian	22	34	103
Asian American	445	259	289
Black	2,645	1,622	928
Latino/Hispanic	2,680	1,439	824
White	1,667	3,018	1,848

students in special education and participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations on Race Consortium*, for the past 5 years.

Teachers were selected by the district's superintendent in collaboration with building administrators, Courageous Conversation District Leads, and myself. The selection of general education teachers were based on the following criteria: (a) district's participation in SERC's *Courageous Conversations About Race Consortium*; (b) fourth-grade general education teachers; (c) teacher of 5 or more years of experience; (d) balance in gender; (e) balance in race/ethnicity of teachers; and (f) referred five or more Black students to special education.

Teachers were selected to participate in the study that best met the eligibility criteria for the study. Therefore, each teacher chosen for the study had more than 3 years' teaching experience, and some had as many as 15 to 30 years' teaching experience. The names of each teacher and the research sites have been changed to protect their identities.

A qualitative research was designed because of the desire to study the issues of over-representation of Black students in special education narratively. As previously noted, teachers selected to participate in the study were all from three school districts located in District Reference Group H. DRG is a classification of districts whose students' families are similar in education, income, occupation, and need, and that have roughly similar enrollment. The Connecticut State Board of Education approved DRG classification for purposes of reporting data other than student performance. DRGs are based on the following seven variables: income, education, occupation, family structure, poverty, home language, and district enrollment. They include nine groups, from Group A (very affluent, low-need suburban districts) to the seven high-need, low socioeconomic (SES) urban districts of Group I.

Data Collection

Qualitative research seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved (Merriam, 1998). For the purpose of this dissertation, the purposeful selection process included selected fourth-grade teachers who were able to provide useful data for addressing the objective of the research. Fourth-grade teachers were purposefully selected to provide useful information for addressing the research questions.

The research design consisted of a total of 16 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with fourth-grade general education teachers from across the three District Reference Groups (DRGs): (a) School Districts A, (b) School District B, and (c) School District C. The groups of school districts selected to participate in the study are a part of the same DRG with similar student and family background characteristics. All three of these districts have also participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations on Race Consortium*, for the past 5 years.

Data collection consisted of interviews and a review of special education data submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education from schools in District Reference Group (DRGs) specifically, School District A, School District B, and School District C at the conclusion of the training for patterns of referral by race and disabilities (see Appendix E for full DRGs description).

Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method of this study was semi-structured interviews with 16 fourth-grade general education teachers from schools/districts that participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*, for the past 5 years (2004-2009). The use of semi-structured interviews with open-ended interview questions elicited the perceptions of general education teachers about how and why Black students are referred to special education. Interviews took place at individual schools for approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews with fourth-grade teachers included questions related to: (a) attitudes; (2) beliefs; and (c) perceptions about the over-representation of Black students in special education. Interviews with teachers provided a

fuller understanding of how and why Black students are referred to special education. Each question focused on facilitating a deeper understanding of the perceptions general education fourth-grade teachers have about over-representation. Interviews involved questions that were clear, singular, and open-ended in order to elicit the views of the participants. Additionally, strategies such as rephrasing statements and the use of probes were employed to encourage participant elaboration (M. Patton, 1990). The interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of each participant and assured confidentiality verbally and in writing. According to Eisner (1998, p. 183), conducting interviews requires the researcher to listen to what people have to say about their activities, their feelings, their lives.

Documents

In addition to one-on-one interviews, I reviewed special education data submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education for patterns of referral by race and disabilities from District Reference Groups (DRGs) (School District A, School District B, and School District C).

Eisner (1998) noted that another important source of information about schools is the records that frequently reveal what people will not or cannot say. He further mentioned that school records relevant to the issues a researcher wishes to address are also potentially relevant resources for generating a context in which meaning can be deepened. The use of multiple forms of data provided the material that contributed to credible interpretation from School Districts A, B, and C (see Tables 2-4).

Individual semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) were conducted with fourth-grade teachers at their schools. Questions asked during the semi-structured

Table 2

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District A

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	23.6%	23.7%	20.7%	19.2%
Intellectual Disabilities	3.6%	3.9%	4.6%	4.4%
Emotional Disturbance	13.2%	10.6%	11.2%	10.5%
Speech or Language Impairments	23.8%	26.3%	28.0%	28.7%
Other Disabilities	14.5%	10.3%	11.2%	10.0%
Other Health Impairments	10.8%	17.3%	15.8%	17.3%
Autism	7.6%	8.0%	8.5%	10.0%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	380	388	411	411

Note. From *Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report*, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author.

Table 3

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District B

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	38.8%	38.2%	37.7%	35.0%
Intellectual Disabilities	7.8%	7.8%	7.1%	8.3%
Emotional Disturbance	12.1%	13.2%	13.7%	15.0%
Speech or Language Impairments	10.7%	12.7%	12.7%	13.9%
Other Disabilities	11.7%	11.8%	11.9%	10.6%
Other Health Impairments	16.5%	13.7%	15.1%	14.4%
Autism	2.4%	2.5%	1.9%	2.8%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	206	204	212	180

Note. From *Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report*, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author.

Table 4

Special Education Referrals: K-12 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity, District C

Disability Category	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2007-2008	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2008-2009	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2009-2010	Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011
Learning Disability	24.3%	30.6%	37.7%	35.0%
Intellectual Disabilities	2.3%	1.4%	7.1%	8.3%
Emotional Disturbance	9.6%	8.2%	13.7%	15. %0
Speech or Language Impairments	27.1%	30.6%	12.7%	13.9%
Other Disabilities	16.1%	11.9%	11.9%	10.6%
Other Health Impairments	14.7%	12.3%	15.1%	14.4%
Autism	6.0%	5.0%	1.9%	2.8%
Total Sum of Black Students with Disabilities	218	219	220	213

Note. From *Students With Disabilities in Connecticut: A Statistical Report*, by Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007-2011, Hartford, CT: Author.

interviews with 16 fourth-grade teachers were open-ended to allow for in-depth responses. Some responses led to additional questions, which enabled the respondents to elaborate further on their answers, thereby adding to the richness of the descriptions contained in this analysis. A set protocol for all interviews was followed in an attempt to address the research questions while still allowing for dialogue and discussion to take

place. Merriam noted that as the researcher conducts interviews, the main purpose of an interview is to obtain a special kind of information (p. 71).

I followed the process outlined by both Creswell (2003) and Patton (2001) for data analysis, which included identifying key words and phrases, organizing the information thematically, interpreting the meanings of phrases, and analyzing the meanings for what they revealed. The goal of this approach is to uncover the meaning an individual attributes to his or her understanding in a systematic way, using themes or clusters of data.

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Bilen (1982, p. 145) define qualitative data analysis as working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others. Qualitative researchers tend to use inductive analysis of data, meaning that the critical themes emerge out of the data (M. Patton, 1990).

Merriam (1998) noted that the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection. Data analysis was conducted using systematic qualitative methods. First, a coding scheme was developed based on the recurring issues and concerns that emerged. Through the interviews, conceptual categories were identified that directly related to the perceptions of general education teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to special education. Transcripts of interviews were sorted and grouped under the related category (e.g., identifying, categorizing the primary patterns in the data). Both an open and closed coding system were employed. A process referred to

as coding facilitated the constant comparison method, as a way to develop and refine interpretations of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I coded for specific predetermined categories. Next, as those categories were identified and labeled, subsequent categories were developed as having significance and relevance to the research questions. By chunking the coded transcripts, it condensed large amounts of information into short statements using overarching themes that emerge as the data are analyzed.

Trustworthiness/Validity Issues

Trustworthiness and validity are seen as the strengths of qualitative research. However, they are used to determine whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the reader of an account (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher seeks believability, based on coherence (Eisner, 1991) and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance validity issues in this study, member checking was used. Member checking is taking the data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible (Merriam, 1998).

Through this process, participants become members of the interpretive community and validate the interpretations of the researcher. Individual transcribed data were typed and shared with participants of the study to ensure that their words were not taken out of context and to validate interview data by verifying that I captured their thoughts accurately. Establishing the trustworthiness and the validity of the conclusions is a critical aspect of qualitative study.

Ethics

Merriam (1998) noted that concerns about the validity and reliability are common to all forms of research, as well as that the investigation be conducted in an ethical manner. In qualitative studies, ethical dilemmas are likely to emerge with regard to the collection of data and in the dissemination of research findings. In conducting this study, the following safeguards were employed to protect the participants' rights:

1. The research objectives were articulated verbally and in writing so that they were clearly understood by schools/districts. This included descriptions of how data will be used.
2. A copy of the written permission from the superintendent to proceed with the study was given to participants. Participants were assured confidentiality.
3. Verbatim transcriptions and written interpretations and reports were made available to the participants.
4. Interviews with fourth-grade teachers included questions related to: (a) biases, (b) attitudes, (c) beliefs, and (d) perceptions about the over-representation of Black students in special education.
5. The risks and benefits of participation in the study. I shared with schools/districts that there were no known risks for participating in the study. Interviews about the perceptions of general education teachers assisted in providing a fuller understanding about how and why Black students are referred to special education.
6. The information collected during this study would be used in a doctoral dissertation. The participants' rights, interests, and wishes would be considered when reporting data.

7. Schools/Districts understood that their participation in this study was voluntary. They understood that they could withdraw their participation in this study at any time without any penalty or prejudice.

Generalizability Issues

The issue of generalizability centers on whether it is possible to generalize from a single case, or from qualitative inquiry in general, and if so in what way? According to Eisner (1998), individual generalizations are derived from life itself and direct contact with the qualitative world. It is one of our important sources of generalizations. Individuals tend to generalize using the natural abilities afforded to many in life such as hearing, touching, taste, smell, and sight, which facilitate the capacities to create ideas, images, analysis, matching of images, and application of skills. Eisner further commented that what we generalize is what one learns, and that these generalizations can be regarded as skills, images, and ideas.

The conditions that restrict the scope of this study were the selection of the sample and the generalizable nature of the research. Several factors in the study limited attempts to generalize results about the over-representation of Black students in special education in selected Connecticut public schools to other school districts. The sample was purposeful. The study was limited only to fourth-grade general education teachers in selected DRGs in Connecticut's public schools that participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Additionally, the participants of this qualitative study were limited to no more than 16 general education teachers. The reliability of the data depended on the honesty of the interviewees. Finally, the findings of this study do not claim to be generalizable to all school districts.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how and in what ways teachers' processes, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions have changed as a result of their schools'/districts' participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversation About Race*. In spite of the existing abundance of data highlighting the over-representation issue and the extant literature challenging special education processes that lead to identification and placement, the problem of over-representation of African American students in special education continues to persist (Patton, 1998). However, very few studies have applied a theoretical framework that explains the history and contextual influences that affect this problem and, therefore, why it continues to exist. Critical Race Theory (CRT) suggests that over-representation cannot be solved without carefully considering how the racism experienced by Blacks drives the process (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Critical Race Theory, an emerging field of inquiry (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), has the potential to serve as both a framework and a tool for critique and analysis in K-12 education research. CRT deals directly with race and racism in response to White dominance and privilege. The goal of CRT is to place a mirror in front of racist practices and bring about social justice to oppressed people. In an attempt to apply this knowledge

to American schooling, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to education about 10 years ago. CRT address five areas to counter the perceived hegemony of White-dominate culture: (a) counter-storytelling; (b) permanence of racism; (c) whiteness as property; (d) interest convergence; and (e) critique of liberalism.

1. *Counter-storytelling* (Matsuda, 1995). Counter-storytelling has become an important part of educational research and focuses on telling a story that shines the spotlight on racism to counteract notions or myths held by members of the majority culture. These stories expose racial stereotypes that are used against members from minority racial groups. It presupposes the necessity of allowing the voices of minority or marginalized groups to be expressed and is effective mostly due to the emotional and political empowerment implicit in the stories and the storytelling process.

2. *Permanence of racism*. A belief in the CRT is that racism does not disappear even after it is exposed as historical and its effects are both visible and invisible (Bell, 1992). The theory suggests institutional racism that is embedded in the nation's culture, evident in the hierarchy of its government, financial, and educational institutions.

3. *Whiteness as property*. Harris (1995) suggests that functions and attributes of property historically have been used in establishing Whiteness as a form of property. Whites have dominated the capitalist system since inception. In America, Blacks were brought here as slaves and were considered property. The White power structure designed and operated an effective, oppressive economic system that kept Blacks powerless. When segregation was finally defeated (*Brown v. Board of Education*) in 1954, Whites who were the heads of the public schools used tracking and special education placement to maintain the status quo. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests there is

educational inequity because Whites have exclusive access to high quality and rigorous curriculum. While there is re-segregating of America's special education classes in public schools due in part to tracking, they are vastly underrepresented in gifted and talented placement courses.

4. *Interest convergence* (Bell, 1980). The author here argues that gains by African Americans, especially the Civil Rights Movement, took place only when there was a convergence with self-interests of Whites.

5. *Critique of liberalism* (Williams, 1997). In this fraction of CRT, the emphasis is a criticism of liberalism. The three specific areas are: (a) the notion of color blindness; (b) neutrality of the law; and (c) incremental change.

The thoughtful reflections of the teachers in this study provided a basis for the examination of current local and state policies, practices, and philosophies regarding culturally responsive educational systems and inform pedagogical, curricular, assessment, and professional development. Specifically, the results of this study assisted the CSDE in their focused monitoring efforts of local public schools in the area of over-representation of Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education. In addition, the results assisted SERC in the design of job-embedded and state-wide professional development activities in order to be more responsive to the needs of local public schools in the following areas: (a) early intervening services; (b) cultural relevant instruction; and (c) the over-representation of Black students in special education.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of general education elementary teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to special education. Secondly,

this study described how and in what ways the processes, attitudes and behaviors of fourth-grade teachers changed as a result of their schools’/districts’ participation in *CC About Race*. This chapter describes the results of interviews with general education teachers. The interviews of the teachers are presented as individual stories using pseudonyms. Through their stories, the “voices of teachers” are heard, and the stories capture their essence.

The findings are organized in the following order: (a) Essence of their Stories; and (b) Emerging four major themes from the one-on-one interviews with teachers. The themes that emerged included: (a) A Teacher’s Dilemma; (b) I See Color Now; (c) Teacher Mis-Match; and (d) Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development. The findings are reported by a discussion of the themes that emerged relevant to the guiding questions.

The Essence of Their Stories

Please note that teachers interviewed for this study were from urban high-need districts/schools where a majority of the teaching and administrative staff are White and from middle/upper-class backgrounds, whereas the student population consisted mostly of Black and Hispanic/Latino students.

The Essence of Miss Griffin

I refer students to special education to get the necessary support they need. This is the only way for them to get the help they need.

Miss Griffin

Miss Griffin, who is White, has taught in several schools in her district for the past 25 years. She has been at her current school for 5 years. Miss Griffin loves teaching in this district because of its rich diversity of students and families. As a teacher, she does

everything that she can before a referral is considered. Miss Griffin uses a combination of data, guided reading, and differentiated instruction. In addition, she uses a variety of whole- and small-group instruction to meet the individual needs of students. However, Miss Griffin feels that the current educational system is based on a wait-and-fail model. She believes that the assumption is that failure of a Black student must first be documented in order to secure support and help for students with academic and behavior concerns.

The Essence of Mrs. Hicks

Students are referred because of behavior, low academic performance, and assumptions by the teachers/schools.
Mrs. Hicks

Mrs. Hicks, who is a White teacher, has been teaching fourth grade for more than 20 years in an urban high-need district. She feels that Black students are often referred to special education because of a lack of skill development and experience of the classroom teacher. In addition, she feels that students are referred due to low academic performance. Mrs. Hicks believes that the prior knowledge and cultural background of a teacher is critical and makes a difference. She grew up in the town where she teaches and has seen the changes. Mrs. Hicks felt that she needed to embrace the changes in the diversity of the student body. Today, she is a better teacher because she is open to the different cultures of the students and their families.

The Essence of Miss Green

Black students are sometime referred to special education because of their appearance. Not only their appearance but, where the student lives and the language spoken.
Miss Green

Miss Green, who is a Black teacher, has been teaching fourth grade for the past 6 years. She feels that there are different beliefs about students of color. Miss Green has noticed that in her school many Black students are referred to special education because of their appearance and where they live. She believes that a teacher does not need to be Black in order to teach Black students. However, the teacher needs to understand the norms, various cultures of students, and be comfortable within their own culture.

The Essence of Miss Ellis

The cultural background of a teacher is important. Many of our teachers in this school are White and middle class. A teacher does not need to be Black to teach students of color, but they need to have a desire and passion to teach all children.

Miss Ellis

Miss Ellis, who is a Black teacher, has been teaching fourth grade for the past 10 years. She teaches in a high-need urban district. Miss Ellis believes that a teacher does not necessarily need to be Black in order to teach Black students, but the teacher needs to have a desire and passion to teach all children. She further believes that students should be referred to special education only if the service is needed. Miss Ellis feels that special education should not be the only place where a child can receive support.

The Essence of Mr. Trapper

I refer students to special education so that they can get the necessary help they need. Many of the students in my classroom are reading below grade level. Students of color need to fail in order to get the services they need.

Mr. Trapper

Mr. Trapper, who is a White teacher, has been teaching fourth grade for the past 10 years. He feels that many Black students are referred to special education to get the extra academic support that they may need. Personally, he has referred students to special

education so that they could get the necessary help they need beyond the general education classroom. When Mr. Trapper thinks about the over-representation of Black students in special education, he feels that teachers are wasting a significant amount of teaching time completing endless paperwork in order to get help for students in need of extra support.

The Essence of Mr. Matthew

I believe that Black students are not expected to achieve because of the low expectations that are placed upon them by schools and teachers.
Mr. Matthew

Mr. Matthew, who is White, has been teaching fourth grade for the past 15 years. He is of the opinion that Black students are not expected to achieve because of the low expectations that have been placed upon them by schools and teachers. Mr. Matthew strongly believes that there is a mis-match between student and teacher. He further feels that teachers are unprepared for an ever-changing, diverse student body.

The Essence of Miss Cohen

The cultural background of a teacher is important. Many of our teachers in this school are White and middle class. They are nice people and love children. However, they teach who they are through their own racial lenses.
Miss Cohen

Miss Cohen, who is White, has been teaching fourth grade for 12 years. She has always taught fourth grade. Miss Cohen feels that teachers' understanding of the culture of their students is the missing link. She has come to realize that as White teachers, they teach based on their own perspectives and assumptions. Miss Cohen feels as if she has transformed over the past few years. She noticed a change in herself regarding the

selection of curriculum materials and the ability to build sincere relationships with her students.

The Essence of Miss Sutton

I think that many of our teachers are just not skilled or have the necessary training. They do not have the capacity to teach students with “different” learning styles.

Miss Sutton

Miss Sutton, who is White, has been teaching fourth grade for 15 years. She feels that without prior experience and exploring various cultures, teachers make assumptions about their students and families. Through her participation in *CC About Race*, Miss Sutton is more aware of who she is as a person and her own prejudices. She feels that if educators do not have a racial awareness of self, tracking of Black students, students not being challenged to take honor classes, low expectations, assumptions, and last names determining the placement of students, more and more students will continue to be placed in special education.

The Essence of Mrs. Carter

I refer students to special education to get the extra help that they need. I also believe that Black students are referred to special education because of racism. Many others feel that schools and teachers are exempted from racism. But, they are not.

Mrs. Carter

Mrs. Carter, who is Hispanic, has been teaching fourth grade in Connecticut for the past 6 years. However, she taught in another state for 14 years. She feels that factors leading to a Black student being referred to special education include low student performance, language difference, and perceived behaviors. Miss Carter used “perceived behaviors” because she believes that everything is based on the “norm” reference of the

teacher. Mrs. Carter feels that there are students who may not fit the behavioral norms and expectations of the classroom or the teacher's style of teaching.

The Essence of Miss Ryan

Students are referred to special education also because of misperceptions about their culture. Also, racism is alive in schools, both consciously and unconsciously.

Miss Ryan

Miss Ryan, who is Hispanic, is a veteran teacher and has been teaching for 25 years. She has taught various grades throughout her teaching career. Miss Ryan believes that the over-representation of Black students in special education is equivalent to an individual who is uninformed, frightened, too sensitive, and afraid to have an honest conversation about race. Instead, they dance around the real issue of race.

The Essence of Miss Norwood

There is something to be said about shared experiences. I am unable to identify with many of my students, but I take the necessary time to get to know them and their families.

Miss Norwood

Miss Norwood, who is a White fourth-grade teacher, has been teaching for the past 25 years. She has been teaching in this particular school for the past 5 years. She believes that a teacher's cultural background is a major factor for a special-education referral being initiated for Black students. Miss Norwood has an increased awareness of her own culture, cultures of her students, and other cultures in general. She feels that the cultural background of teachers is critical. Miss Norwood believes that she is a better teacher today because she is more open to the different cultures.

The Essence of Miss Vaughters

Black student behavior is different from other students in the class—students who are not conforming to the norm (e.g., loud talking, movement of hands, speaking out) are referred to special education.
Miss Vaughters

Miss Vaughters, who is Black, has been teaching fourth grade for 7 years. She believes that there are different beliefs and assumptions about Black students. Miss Vaughters feels that Black students with “aggressive” behaviors, as defined by the teachers, or behaviors displayed as different from other students in the class are usually referred to special education. She used to think that not seeing color was the right thing to do. However, Miss Vaughters has learned that if she did not see the color of her students then she did not see them.

The Essence of Miss James

A teacher’s referral decision is based on the behaviors of students. Students of color would need to fail first prior to referral. The educational system works on a wait-and-fail model.
Miss James

Miss James, who is Black, has been teaching fourth grade for the past 10 years. It is her belief that schools are not designed for Black students. Miss James feels that special education is a superficial means of addressing the real issue—race. She feels that a teacher’s referral decision is based on the behaviors of students. Miss James further believes that Black students are not expected to or directed to take honors classes. She feels that many Black students are not being challenged to achieve more. In addition, Miss James is of the opinion that many of the teachers in her districts are not skilled, nor do they have the will or the necessary training to teach students with “different” learning and behavioral styles.

The Essence of Miss Vitale

*Socioeconomics and the behavior of the student play a role in
Black students being referred to special education.
Miss Vitale*

Miss Vitale, who is White, has been teaching fourth grade for 16 years. She feels that there are numerous factors that contribute to a Black student being referred to special education (e.g., behavioral issues, language, low academic performance, and low state test scores). Miss Vitale believes that some teachers seem to think that special education is the best option for getting students the extra support they need. Miss Vitale admits that she does not know everything about race or that she has even shared similar experiences as her students. Yet, she is open to learning more about the individual cultures of students.

The Essence of Miss Johnson

*Black students are sometimes referred to special education when their
behavior is a little different from other students in the class, the
student is out of the “norm” per se of the classroom: he/she is
loud, talks back to the teacher, questions a teacher’s decision,
or demonstrates cultural behaviors (e.g., not looking
at the teacher when she is speaking to him).
Miss Johnson*

Miss Johnson, who is Black, has been teaching fourth grade for 14 years. She believes that a teacher’s lack of interactions with his/her students, behavior, and academic standing are factors for determining special education referrals. She thinks that if a Black student’s behavior is a little different from other students in the class, the student is out of the “norm” per se of the classroom: he/she is loud, talks back to the teacher, questions a teacher’s decision, or demonstrates cultural behaviors (e.g., not looking at the teacher when she is speaking to him). Miss Johnson feels that there is an over-representation of

Black students in special education because of a lack of understanding of the student's culture.

The Essence of Miss Brown

There is a different belief system about students of color. Many teachers' referral decision is based on student behavior. In addition, students with English as a Second Language are automatically referred to special education based on language alone.
Miss Brown

Miss Brown, who is Black, has been teaching for the past 20 years. She believes that Black students are usually referred to special education for various reasons, from behavioral issues to low performance. Miss Brown feels that the process begins with the classroom teacher. She further thinks that many teachers actually feel that they are helping Black students by referring them to special education. Furthermore, Miss Brown feels that there is a fear that overcomes teachers. They feel that "something" has to be done and that something all too often is a referral to special education.

The preceding 16 individual accounts are intended to provide a greater understanding as to how and in what ways the processes, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of fourth-grade teachers have been affected as a result of their school's/district's participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversation About Race*.

Emergent Themes

This section describes the results of individual interviews with fourth-grade teachers, with findings categorized into themes with explanations, and discussion presented for each. Analysis of the rich data led to a number of findings. The themes that emerged included: (a) A Teacher's Dilemma, (b) I See Color Now, (c) Teacher Mis-

Match, and (d) Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development. Each theme sheds light on how and why the processes, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of teachers have changed as a result of their school's/district's participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversation About Race*.

A Teacher's Dilemma

Teachers in general are knowledgeable about the provisions of special education services/the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). They are aware that special education is a place to provide additional services, support, programs, specialized placements, or environments to ensure that all students' educational needs are met. Special education is provided to qualifying students at no cost to the parents. There are many students who have special learning needs, and these needs are addressed through special education. Students qualifying for special education have needs that require support that goes beyond what is normally offered in the general classroom. However, teachers are often in a dilemma when in pursuit of extra support for struggling students. Teachers generally want to see all of their students achieve, both academically and social/emotionally. They utilize various instructional strategies and behavioral intervention methods, such as before- and after-school programs, one-on-one instruction/interventions, small groups, homework club, lunch with the principal or social worker, and reading tutoring. Teachers monitor and document the levels of success and improved progress of students. A decision to refer a student to special education is made as a last resort and represents a serious dilemma for many teachers.

Teachers are aware that Connecticut has struggled for a number of years to address minority over-identification and disproportion in special education. However,

they are searching for extra support beyond the general education classroom setting in order to improve the success of all students. The intent of IDEA and other special education laws is and was to address the special and individual needs of students who do not appear to benefit from general education programs and services, including curriculum and instruction.

The first theme that emerged from my study, I have called *A Teacher's Dilemma* with the following subheadings: (a) Special Education: A Place to Get Extra Support for Students; (b) Challenging Behaviors; (c) Students with Language and Reading Concerns; (d) Low Expectations and; (e) Racism in Schools.

In today's classrooms, teachers are faced with an array of challenges and dilemmas in meeting the diverse academic and social/emotional needs of students. The analysis of interviews in this study revealed that teachers are dedicated individuals with the best intentions for their students in spite of the numerous demands and responsibilities placed upon them. Many teachers are overloaded. On a daily basis you find them juggling three to four reading groups, teaching below-grade-level students, large class sizes, dealing with challenging student behaviors, school and district priorities, and federal mandates and regulations. If all of the demands and responsibilities were placed on a platter, they would quickly begin to spill over. The items placed on the platter do not include or take into consideration future programs and initiatives. Teachers become burned out easily from the high level of demands—accountability being placed upon them by their individual schools and districts, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), and IDEA. The demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation have led to changes in school curriculum and instruction. Schools are being

held accountable for improved achievement of all students. Despite the enormous demands and dilemmas teachers face, they still want to do their best for the students they serve.

Classroom teachers are constantly being challenged with a range of dilemmas from designing differentiated lesson plans to meet the individual needs of their students, to the organization and management of their classrooms. They are repeatedly in a dilemma regarding the implementation of various instructional strategies and methods to meet students' needs. When students need extra support beyond what the teacher can provide in the general education classroom, or when students are not making academic progress, teachers are in a dilemma as to what to do and which services would be most appropriate for the student.

Special Education: A Place to Get Extra Support for Students

Teachers in general are confronted every day with the dilemma of getting extra support for students who are not making progress in the general classroom setting. Teachers in the study shared that special education is a means of getting additional academic support for struggling students. They further noted that many of their students require small-group or one-on-one instruction. Miss Ellis noted that she refers students to special education to get the necessary support they need. She also pointed out that students should be referred to special education only if the service is needed—if the student has a true disability. In addition, Miss Norwood contended that students of color in her schools were referred to special education because it was the only way they get the extra help needed. Mrs. Carter remarked, “I refer students to special education to get the extra help that they need.”

Given that the average class size consists of 20 to 25 students, this makes it difficult to provide students with the attention that they need in the general education classroom. The implications of large, crowded classrooms are all too clear—issues with classroom management, time on task, and opportunities to provide students with individualized attention are all compromised.

Teachers in the study provided an exhaustive list of academic and social/emotional supports for students in general education that were in place in their schools/districts prior to a referral to special education (e.g., *Early Intervention Project*, before- and after-school programs, literacy tutoring, lunch bunches, and Positive Behavior Intervention Support). But the teachers still seemed to feel that special education is the most appropriate place to get extra support for academic and social emotional/behavioral concerns. Teachers are committed to making positive changes in the lives of students. It is very evident that they refer students to special education to get the necessary extra help that they need.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all individuals with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and mandates non-discriminatory assessment, identification, and placement of children with disabilities. Children are not to be identified as disabled because of poor achievement that is due to environmental disadvantage or ethnic, linguistic, or racial difference. Because of various factors contributing to over- and under-representation, debate has developed that affects the referral, identification, and placement process of special-needs students. The debate continuously points to issues that are grounded in socio-culturally deprived children

(Valles, 1998). These specific issues deal with race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, socioeconomic class, and language/dialect differences.

The number of students with culturally diverse backgrounds, such as African Americans, continues to increase every day in the school systems. Diversity in general may cause and present significant challenges for the educational world. In many urban schools, Kea and Utley (1998) describe the seriousness and eruption of social consciousness about the “savage inequalities” (Kozel, 1991) faced by minorities and poor children. Schools that participate in these actions judge African American students as having learning deficits and limited potential and place these students disproportionately in low-track, remedial programs.

According to Banks (1992), multiculturalism education is a reform movement designed to bring about educational equity for all students, including those from different races, ethnic groups, social classes, exceptionality, and sexual orientation. How teachers perceive, believe, say, and do can disable or empower multicultural students with disabilities. All teachers must be knowledgeable about cultural diversity, even if they do not teach in communities involving multiculturalism. The lack of teacher awareness of their own ethnocentric views and their limited cultural competence regarding minority and diverse students inhibit the effective practices with students and families from different backgrounds (Kea & Utley, 1998).

Challenging Behaviors

Challenging classroom behavior is an especially demanding issue for many of the teachers in this study. Special education is perceived by several of the teachers as the only resource available for helping students who are not succeeding in the general

education classroom. Teachers are persistently being confronted with behavioral issues and are in a dilemma that attempts to balance providing effective instruction and classroom management. In order to manage some of the behavioral issues, teachers work with other specialists in their schools to design behavioral intervention plans, strategies, and techniques to support students with challenging behaviors. Teachers have to contend with student behavioral issues, which takes away time from teaching. They are constantly in a dilemma ensuring that the classroom is well organized, students are on task in spite of the behavioral disruptions, meeting with various reading and math groups, and working individually with students. Miss Vitale commented, “Socio-economics and behavior of the student certainly play a role to them being referred to special education.” Miss Hicks declared that students are referred because of behavior and assumptions by the teachers. Miss Brown noted, “Many teachers’ referral decision is based on student behavior.”

Miss Sutton shared that her decision as a teacher to refer a student to special education is not a decision that is taken lightly. Miss Sutton continues by explaining that she first observes the student to verify that there is actually a behavioral issue or an instructional one. She further noted that work is modified for students in order to build upon the student’s success. She looks at what a student can do, focusing on the positives. Conversely, Mr. Matthew commented, “There are some teachers that are informally giving students labels—Learning Disabled (LD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), because they are active—moving around the classroom without permission.” He further noted that “students are getting out of their seats without permission and not following the classroom expectations.” Mr. Matthew further noted that students are

referred to special education for behavioral issues, such as talking out in class. In addition, teachers shared that they do everything possible to meet the individual needs of students before a referral is considered.

Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are disciplined more often and more severely than are White students for comparable inappropriate behaviors (Cartledge, 1999). Data from the Office of Civil Rights have shown that African American students, particularly males, are disciplined by suspension, expulsion, and corporal punishment at significantly higher rates than their percentage in the general school population, and than are other ethnic groups (Townsend, 2000). The differential treatment of African American students and other students of color in terms of disciplinary actions appears to be related to race more than socioeconomic status or student behavior (Skiba & Peterson, 2000) and serves to hinder their learning by limiting their access to instructional and social activities, causing them to be tracked in lower ability groups, lowering their self-esteem, and alienating them from school (Townsend, 2000).

Teachers and students often come from different cultural backgrounds, which results in different learning styles and divergent views about appropriate classroom behavior (Kea & Utley, 1998). For instance, although schools have meticulously designed behavioral norms that require conformity, passivity, quietness, and individualized competitive participation during teacher-focused instructional activities, some African American students are accustomed to performing multiple tasks simultaneously and may therefore prefer to work with others during instructional tasks (Townsend, 2000). Hence, this conflict in orientation may result in teachers' perceiving

students as having a behavioral problem (e.g., insubordinate, disrespectful, or inappropriate) (Ishi-Jordan, 1997). Students whose ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds are different from their teachers' may get into trouble if they behave in ways that are acceptable in their homes and communities but not in school (Grossman, 1995).

Cultural variations in verbal and non-verbal communication also affect behavioral norms and expectations in the classroom with students of color (Duhaney, 2000; Kea & Utley, 1998; Neal, McCray, & Webb-Johnson, 2001). For example, because some African American speakers may be more active and animated than their teachers, teachers may misinterpret this communication process as confrontational (Patton & Townsend, 1999).

School districts can engage in a variety of actions to address the disproportional use of exclusionary disciplinary practices with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Townsend, 2000). According to the researchers, school districts and educators need to examine their behavioral expectations in terms of cultural biases and their usefulness in contributing to a safe, positive, and supportive learning environment that respects and affirms student diversity. In addition, educators need to explore the extent to which student behavior is related to differences between students and teachers in terms of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Because many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may have different cultural perspectives from their teachers, common communication misunderstandings between students and teachers are often interpreted by educators as behavioral problems. Therefore, educators need to examine their culturally based viewpoints, attitudes, and

behaviors and recognize how their cultural beliefs may conflict with the cultural beliefs of their students (Obiakor, 1999).

When dealing with students from any different racial group it is important to understand the cultural aspects of that particular group. African-American students are often viewed as being hostile in the education sphere and non-compliant (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Actually, many students who are viewed as being hostile “may not be hostile” in any way. There are social context clues that many teachers and adults miss and mix.

According to Watkins and Kurtz (2001), the issue of discrimination from White teachers toward African American students exists and is a problem. Many times African American students are misunderstood through their body language and comments, which leads to issues of over-representation. Watkins and Kurtz further noted that many of the teachers misread cultural attributes as signs of defiance and inappropriate behavior. Furthermore, the same teachers had so many preconceived notions about the students that it made their efforts highly ineffective.

Students With Language and Reading Concerns

Teachers are often in a dilemma in meeting the needs of students with language and reading concerns. However, a student should be referred to special education if they have low language and reading skills. Elementary education teachers are primarily responsible for all content areas (e.g., math, science, social studies, reading/literacy, writing, and health). For the most part, they are generalists. The teaching profession is not like any other profession. Teachers have backgrounds within their training in which they are stronger than others (e.g., working with lower level students, higher performing

students, students with language and speech issues, and ESL students). Teachers do their best to work with all students and improve their academic achievement. However, there are times when teachers are confronted with the needs of their students which are beyond the area of expertise of the general education classroom setting.

Elementary teachers do everything within their knowledge and skill set to meet the academic and social/emotional needs of students. However, when a student does not conform to the norms of the class/school (e.g., reading at grade level, following classroom behavior expectations, low test scores) and the student is still not showing progress, teachers often turn to special education for support and as a resource.

The teachers in this study commented that students are referred to special education because of language and low reading skills. They further pointed out that students with English as a Second Language (ESL) are often automatically referred to special education based on language alone. Teachers also reported that many of their Black students are reading below grade level (e.g., reading at the first or second grade level), and have issues with language and speech. Miss Cohen noted that some factors contributing to Black students being referred to special education are language, academic performance, test scores, and skill defects. Miss Carter shared, “Other factors may include low student performance and language difference.”

Teachers asserted that Black students would not be referred to special education unless they were not making academic progress or because of test scores. They also face dilemmas when students are not performing as well as other students in the classroom. Teachers mentioned that a student is often referred to special education “because of their inability to produce what is expected of them academically.” Teachers further stated that

test scores of students are also a factor for special education referrals. Miss Hicks reported that students are referred to special education because of low academic performance and assumptions about their learning by teachers.

Teachers are proactive and do not want to see a student fail, or wait until they have failed prior to doing something to provide extra support for them. They feel compelled to do something, and that “something” is often special education, which is thought to provide students with specialized instruction. Teachers are extremely devoted and take their roles very seriously. They are committed and have an obligation to teach all students, regardless of their learning potential. Teachers do not give up easily on doing their best to effectively teach all students.

Teachers who participated in *CC About Race* received training on culturally relevant instruction and have implemented relevant strategies in their classrooms. There are many teachers trying hard to implement culturally relevant strategies, although they may not have received staff development to teach them what to do. Kuykendall (2004) noted that minority students must be exposed to instructional strategies that increase their understanding. Such strategies as understanding how culture impacts the way a student learns, understanding the importance of learning styles, and understanding the role of differentiating instruction for minority children can lead to increased student achievement. By incorporating a variety of culturally relevant strategies, educators can effectively respond to and instruct minority youths.

The literature suggests that all children should receive culturally responsive literacy instruction that builds on their prior knowledge, interests, motivation, and home language, and emphasizes cultural relevance (August & Hakuta, 1998; Au, 2000; Rueda,

MacGillivray, & Monzó, 2001). The researchers support a balanced approach to literacy instruction that promotes authentic literacy experiences in a supportive learning environment while providing the high level of explicit instruction needed for students to gain important skills and strategies (Delpit, 1995). This instruction should include frequent opportunities to practice reading with a variety of rich materials in meaningful contexts (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). It should also include explicit instruction in phonological awareness, the alphabetic code, fluency, and vocabulary development (National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), as well as comprehension strategies. We believe that a focus on the complete literacy event does not mean that traditional skills are unimportant. “Rather these skills are situated within a holistic context that is intimately linked with goals and conditions of reading” (Roller, 1996, p. 34). If students do not receive such instruction, how can we be assured they have in fact received an adequate opportunity to learn and are appropriate candidates for a special education referral?

Literacy instruction should take into account the socio-cultural contexts within which students learn (Artiles, 2002). A fundamental assumption of this approach is that culture matters, that disproportionate representation is due in part to the inadequate attention to culture by researchers and practitioners. Culture is not a unitary construct, but rather is complex and dynamic. In any given classroom, there are multiple cultures “as embodied in the cultural toolkit that each person brings to school and the cultures that are created as students, teachers, and school staff interact over time” (p. 696).

But what does it mean to account for culture when teaching children to read? First, it means taking a broad view of what counts as being literate in a multiethnic,

diverse society. It means understanding the complex socio-cultural, institutional, and political contexts that influence students' acquisition of literate behaviors (Artiles, 2003). It means recognizing that when children begin school, they may not have experienced all the same interactions with print as their mainstream peers, but they still have had valuable experiences that teachers can and should build upon. It means explicitly connecting home, community, and school literacy practices. It means recognizing that students' discourse and behavioral styles may not match school-expected ways, but are still to be validated (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983). It means recognizing that bilingualism is an asset and that learning English should be an additive rather than a subtractive process (August & Hakuta, 1998). Finally, it means making sure students are motivated and engaged in reading activities (Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSecker, 2000; Rueda et al., 2001). Although teachers need not be "insiders" in a particular culture to offer culturally responsive instruction, they should make an effort to learn about the cultures represented in their classrooms, respect students' values, and view differences in students' literacies as strengths, not deficits (Alvermann, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Culturally responsive literacy instruction requires choosing relevant multicultural literature and other reading materials (Bieger, 1995/1996; Godina & McCoy, 2000). Multicultural literature should be used in transformative ways that reconstruct the curriculum so that students are able to view concerns, themes, problems, and concepts from the perspectives of diverse groups (Banks & Banks, 1997). Literature should also be selected that allows students to identify social problems and to read about how the main character takes action to solve these problems. This approach helps students realize that all ethnic groups have roots in the past and a strong heritage (Bieger, 1995/1996).

Culturally responsive literacy programs tap into community resources that promote children's literacy. One way to do this is by enlisting volunteers to serve as reading tutors (Baker, Gersten, & Keating, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2001; Invernizzi, Juel, & Rosemary, 1997; Wasik, 1998; Wasik & Slavin, 1993). Another is to invite parents and others in the neighborhood to share their expertise or "funds of knowledge" on a multitude of topics (Moll & González, 1994). For example, an effective model includes local elders in the schooling of American Indian youth (Aguilera, 2003). Programs that focus on developing partnerships with parents and other caregivers to enhance home literacy experiences also are beneficial. Parents can learn to interact with their children in ways that promote literacy achievement (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst, 1992; Whitehurst et al., 1994).

Low Expectations

To further shape the theme of *A Teacher's Dilemma*, teachers reported that there are different beliefs about Black students. Miss Johnson commented, "Black students are not expected to achieve because of low expectations that are placed upon them by schools and mostly White teachers." Mr. Mathew noted, "Black students are not expected to achieve because of the low expectations that are placed upon them by some schools and teachers." Mrs. Griffin stated, "Some teachers in my building feel that if the student is failing, it is not their fault." Furthermore, there was consensus expressed that teachers assume responsibility for the success of their students.

Teachers further noted that many of their colleagues and schools as a whole have placed extremely low expectations upon Black students. Ferguson (2002) summarized

research on achievement gap, frequently finding that teachers often focus on students' deficits. These deficits are either perceived or real. Ferguson's premise is that perceptions and behaviors held by educators' increase referrals and the subsequent placement of Black students in special education.

The majority of teachers are not a cultural, racial, or socio-economic reflection of American's changing student demographics. It is suggested that there are not enough teachers who have been trained to deal with other people's culture, class, or gender, as well as their own. Additionally, many teachers have low expectations about the innate ability of racial minorities and poor children (Delpit, 1995; Patton & Meyer, 2001).

It is critical that teachers examine and change their basic assumptions and beliefs about students of color. Teachers must believe that all children can learn, regardless of their ethnic group, gender, or social class (Banks, 1992; Collins, 2002). Howard (2007) emphasizes the critical need for educators of all racial and cultural groups to develop new competencies and pedagogies to successfully engage students in our ever-changing, diverse student populations.

In addition, Edmonds and Frederiksen (1979) noted that high expectations for students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, and effective family/community involvement are the cornerstones of effective schools. He maintains that schools must have a climate of high expectations reflected in staff and family beliefs, and must demonstrate that all students can attain mastery of the essential content and school skills.

Teacher expectations can have detrimental effects on those students whom they recognize as low achievers or as having behavioral problems. Students who feel that their teachers have low expectations of them are "more likely to become passive

spectators rather than active participants in the educational process” (McCormick & Noriega, 1986, pp. 224-234). This internalization of teacher expectations and reaction to teacher behaviors leads “low achievers” to disengage from school.

Popular thinking suggests that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and expertise to be unbiased and fair when dealing with their students. The literature, however, suggests that teachers, though equipped with college educations, generally are not exposed to collegiate training in topics on race, inequality, or multiculturalism (Sleeter, 2001). In short, pre-service teachers (teachers in training) have little knowledge of or experience with students of different races. As such, they tend to hold stereotypical beliefs about urban students, have little awareness of societal racism and discrimination, and are unsure of their ability to teach minority students.

Racism in Schools

Racism is defined as a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race (“Racism,” n.d.). Mrs. Carter eloquently pointed out that, “as teachers, we teach who we are and through our experiences or lack of experiences.” She passionately went on to say that she loves teaching in her district because of the rich diversity of students and families. The teachers in this study pointed out that a teacher’s knowledge and experiences of the various cultures of his/her students are essential. They continued to express that it also helps to build a positive relationship between teacher and student. Teachers remarked further that it is important for students to feel that their cultures are validated and honored. Miss Brown stated, “I feel that there is an over-representation of Black students in special education because of a lack in understanding of their culture.”

Miss Ryan noted, “Racism is alive in schools, both consciously and unconsciously.” She followed up with many other people thinking that schools and teachers are exempt from racism. However, as Miss Ryan pointed out, they are not. Miss James contended that students are not being challenged to take honors classes. She maintained that assumptions and names determine the placement of students. Miss Ryan continued, “Special education is a superficial means of addressing the real issue—race.” Mrs. Johnson further noted that racism is the “elephant” in the room that needs to be put on the table for discussion.

Miss Green shared that Black students are sometimes referred to special education because of their appearance. She continued by noting, “Not only their appearance but, where the student lives and the language spoken.” There was evidence from teachers in the study that there are deeply held assumptions regarding a student's ability to learn and achieve based on their skin color and socio-economic status. Miss Cater stated, “The student may conform to the classroom expectations or have lower academic skills. Sometimes students may not fit a teacher’s teaching style.” She followed up by sharing that everything is based on the “norm reference” of the teacher. Miss Ryan noted, “When it comes to why or why not Black students are referred to special education, it depends on the classroom teacher and the skill level of students.” Miss Carter commented that she also believes that Black students are referred to special education because of racism. Miss Ryan in a soft tone remarked, “Racism is alive in schools, both consciously and unconsciously.”

Miss Green maintained that the prior knowledge and cultural understanding of a teacher is critical. She shared, “I have taught in this district for the past 29 years. I grew up in the town and I have watched the changes. I had to embrace the changes of

languages and diversity within our student body.” According to Giroux (1992), teachers bring themselves—their life experiences, histories, and culture—into the classroom. They bring their assumptions and beliefs about what a good teacher is and does, their knowledge of education theory, research, and human development, and their love and knowledge of content areas. They bring their personalities and teaching styles that are shaped by social and cultural interactions. Some teachers are extroverted and come alive when they are with others. Other teachers are energetic and lively around their students, but need downtime to refuel and ground themselves. Some teachers love routine and predictability, while other teachers become particularly excited when routines are interrupted and they can act spontaneously. All of this is shaped and reshaped by daily experiences in the classroom. The longer teachers teach, the more their beliefs and knowledge are reorganized and sculpted by experience.

Experience, culture, and personality are just part of who teachers are, and they go wherever teachers go—including their classrooms. For teachers from dominant cultural backgrounds (White, middle-class teachers in the United States), their own culture may not be something they are immediately aware of, because it fits so seamlessly with prevailing opinions, beliefs, values, and expectations about behavior, education, and life choices. Yet, many choices that teachers make are determined more from their cultural background than from individual beliefs. The expectations that teachers hold for teaching and learning are grounded in cultural beliefs that may be unfamiliar to students and families from non-dominant cultures.

Teachers in this study continually discussed their culture and the danger of being unaware of that expression. Coming to an understanding of the ways in which one’s

beliefs, experiences, values, and assumptions are linked to culture is an essential feature of culturally responsive practice. As Giroux (1992) says, “Teachers need to find ways of creating a space for mutual engagement of lived difference that does not require the silencing of a multiplicity of voices by a single dominant discourse” (p. 201). Cultural responsiveness requires teachers to acknowledge and understand their own cultural values and how these values impact their own teaching practice.

Cultural disconnect can occur when individuals from different cultures interact. Schools in which the cultural backgrounds of teachers differ significantly from their students because of ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious, or economic reasons are especially vulnerable to cultural disconnect.

In May 2000, on the 40th anniversary of *Brown v. Board*—the landmark case that ruled segregated schools unconstitutional—the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against the state of California that brought the essence of institutionalized racism into sharp focus. Filed on behalf of 100 students in San Francisco, the case was named after Eliezer Williams, then a seventh-grader at Luther Burbank Middle School in San Francisco (Kuznia, 2009). At Williams’s school, the textbooks were so scarce students could not take them home; they were so old they still did not recognize the collapse of the Soviet Union. At certain times during the school day, there were no bathrooms; attorneys said students had urinated or defecated on themselves for lack of a restroom. The school was infested with vermin. The suit argued that the state was failing to provide thousands of California students with the basic necessities for a decent education. Most of the students in question were poor minorities. In 2004, the case was settled, with the state

setting aside \$138 million for improving the textbooks and facilities of underserved student populations across California.

Keleher and Johnson (2009) argued that the Williams case shows that institutionalized racism is alive and well in the 21st century. The researchers noted that institutional racism is frequently subtle, unintentional and invisible, but always potent. Often, institutional racism involves complex and cumulative factors; one example of this is when many students of color, year after year, do not have access to fully credentialed teachers, high-quality curriculum materials, and advanced courses.

Since the Civil Rights Movement and its achievements in the 1960s, the United States government implemented a number of laws to ensure racism no longer affects society. However, it still remains in many segments of the population in crime, job discrimination, and especially education. It is a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce the inherent superiority of a particular race.

Connecticut's racial and economic isolation and its impact on education were highlighted in its landmark desegregation case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, which commenced in 1989 and was ruled on in 1996. In *Sheff*, the Connecticut Supreme Court found that students of color in Hartford's schools were being denied their constitutional rights to equal educational opportunity due to racial and economic isolation. The CSDE and its Regional School Choice Office (RSCO) have taken great efforts to remedy the isolation/segregation of Hartford's students of color through various "choice" programs and magnet school options. However, much still needs to be done to fulfill the court's

mandates. Overall, Connecticut's children remain highly segregated by race and income in its capital city, as well as across the state.

In Connecticut, children of color not only lack access to equitable educational opportunities, as mentioned in the 2010 report by the Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement, but to many other opportunities as well. It is for these reasons that policy makers and school leaders must consider any educational issues—from graduation rates to achievement test scores—in the context of race and culture.

Historically in Connecticut, African American students were up to four times more likely to be identified as having mental retardation (i.e., an intellectual disability) than their White peers. This significant disproportionality was addressed in the *P.J. v. State of Connecticut* (1992) Settlement Agreement goals, which required Connecticut school districts to reduce the disparate identification of students with intellectual disability by racial and ethnic group. Similarly, as late as 2008, African American children in Connecticut were 1.8 times more likely to be identified as emotionally disturbed. More recently, students have not been disproportionately identified for special education at the state level, according to recent annual performance reports (APRs). However, for certain districts, disproportionality across special education categories continues to be a persistent problem.

W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1903 that the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America, and the islands of the sea. Over 100 years later, we continue to see that problem of the color line in our schools today: incredible disparities between the educational outcomes of children of color and their White counterparts. According to

Noguera and Wing (2006), students of color are under-represented in most categories associated with positive academic outcomes, and are over-represented in categories associated with negative academic outcomes.

For centuries, we have avoided discussing race and institutionalized racism and its detrimental effects on our students. Dr. Beverly Tatum's book, *Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Segregation* (2007), clearly indicates that if educators do not fully engage in dialogue about what they can do differently, and bring an understanding of the legacy of race and racism in our society into the conversation, they will not be successful in addressing this and other national challenges. As we consider the statistical facts, it is difficult not to think about racial inequality as a predominant factor causing today's achievement gaps. It is our responsibility, as educators, to garner the courage to disaggregate and interpret the data through what Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2003) calls the "cultural eye."

One of the basic premises of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the notion of the *permanence of racism* in society. Bell (1992) states, "Racism is a permanent component of American life" (p. 13). According to Bell (1995), within a CRT framework, a "realist view" requires acknowledging the dominant role that racism has played and continues to play in American society. This can be both a conscious and an unconscious act (Lawrence, 1995). This theory suggests that institutional racism is embedded in the nation's culture and is evident in the hierarchy of its governmental, financial, and educational institutions. Furthermore, the notion of the *permanence of racism* implies that racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains. Such

structures allocate the privileging of Whites and the subsequent “*othering*” of people of color in all arenas, including education.

In summary, teachers find themselves in a dilemma in regard to getting extra help for students in need of academic and behavioral support. These issues are not new. Others have noted that through the years, little attention has been focused on the official definition of special education (Tucker, 2002). Furthermore, Tucker noted that an official definition of special education has been in existence dating back to the mid-70s, or before. Tucker pointed out that the following federal definition has remained intact in the Individuals With Education Disabilities Act since 1975. IDEA defines the term special education as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents or guardians, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability.” He goes on to make the point that special education as defined by the IDEA was never intended to imply a place, a program, or a system of service delivery. In addition, Tucker shared that in both state and federal law, special education is defined as “specially designed instruction.” Losen and Orfield (2002) concur with Tucker (2002) that in its original and subsequent conceptualization, special education was not a place or location but rather a service-delivery structure. This service-delivery structure was supposed to provide individualized instruction to students who were identified as having disabilities on the basis of an objective referral, assessment and evaluation, eligibility determination, placement, and exit process (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005).

Teacher referral is a strong predictor of eligibility for special services. In fact, studies show that 73 to 90% of the students referred by classroom teachers for special education evaluations due to academic problems are found eligible for services (Harry &

Klingner, 2007). A child's race and ethnicity significantly influence the child's probability of being mis-identified, mis-classified, and inappropriately placed in special education programs (Losen & Orfield, 2002; National Research Council, 2002).

Research suggests that a teacher's knowledge and skill in working with culturally and linguistically diverse students may impact student success (Au & Raphael, 2000; Cummins, 1996; Garcia, 1994; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). When a teacher understands a student's background, culture, and language, and uses these characteristics as strengths to build upon, the student is validated and more likely to succeed. Further, teachers who understand their students' cultures and backgrounds are better able to design instruction that best meets their needs. This way of teaching is referred to in the literature as "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Culturally relevant pedagogy refers to instructional practices that build on the premise that the way students learn differs across cultures. In order to maximize learning opportunities for students, teachers must gain knowledge about the cultures represented in the classrooms, and then translate this knowledge into instructional practices (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas, 1991).

According to Hilliard (1999), the knowledge and skills to educate all children already exist. However, the will of society to teach all children is questionable. He further concluded that because we have lived historically in an oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which deny their political origin and meaning.

I See Color Now

In the Fall of 2004, during an initial *Courageous Conversations About Race* session with the SERC Staff, Glenn Singleton made the point that seeing an individual's color is critical. He further reiterated that when staff members look at him, they should see that he is a Black man. Mr. Singleton followed up his statement by pointing out that our experiences may have taught us not to see color; however, by acknowledging that we do not see the color of a person, in fact what we are actually saying is that we do not see the person. Mr. Singleton explained that in the case of educators, what we are really saying is that we do not see our students. We are saying that the students are not relevant. The next theme that emerged was *I See Color Now* with the following subheading, Examples of Color Blindness in the Classroom.

Several teachers in this study reported that student data are being reviewed more through the lenses of race. Miss James noted, "I am speaking more openly and talking about race. I find myself sometimes shocking many of my colleagues by saying what they are thinking—their assumptions and attitudes." She followed up with, "I use phrases like: 'I think that you are feeling . . .' 'It sounds as if . . .' 'So, you are thinking that . . .'"

Miss Griffin pointed out, "I have noticed that it is easier to bring up issues about race. I can actually go to my colleagues and have a conversation with them about racial/cultural issues that I am struggling with." She further stated that teachers are also more careful how they speak about students of color and their families. Miss Griffin asserted that the principal of the school seems more supportive and open to suggestions. She declared that teachers want to learn more about diversity.

Teachers also mentioned that through the follow-up *CC About Race* activities their own racial consciousness has been increased. The activities have taught teachers that it is okay to see the color of their students and that if they did not see their color, then they did not see their students. Furthermore, one teacher asked how can they teach someone when they do not see their color? Teachers reported that they are speaking openly about race and discovering that there are still many deeply held beliefs about race.

Miss Norwood reported that *CC About Race* has raised her conscious awareness about race. Another change that she has noticed within herself is having more conversations with her principal about race as it relates to test scores. Miss Norwood admits that she does not know everything about race or has even shared similar experiences as her students. Yet she is open to learning more about the cultures of individual students. Conversely, Miss Hicks noted that *CC About Race* increased her awareness of her own culture, her students, and the culture of other people in general. She followed up with “There is always something new to learn. I am more open and willing to expand my own cultural knowledge and experiences.”

In addition, teachers expressed that they have noticed that it is easier to initiate issues about race. They reported that they feel comfortable going to their colleagues and having a conversation with them regarding various racial/cultural issues. Teachers noted that they are more careful and conscious as to how they speak about students of color and their families. They commented that teachers want to learn more about diversity.

Miss Vitale reported that she is talking more openly about race. However, the conversations have not reached the personal level yet. She further stated that the conversations focus more on her students and families. Miss Vitale was pleased to share

that when student data are reviewed, she is hearing, “What color is this student?” “Most of the students not making progress are from what subgroup?” Conversely, Miss Ellis mentioned that she is having more open and honest conversations about race as it relates to the students she teaches. She further reported that she is also reflecting and having conversations about her own teaching with others. Miss Johnson contends, “I find myself asking more questions about race. I am more aware of who I am as a person of color and my own prejudices.”

Miss Carter shared that she no longer feels the need to filter her conversations about race. She reported, “I am feeling more comfortable discussing race, and what and how I teach.” Miss Green acknowledged that since *CC About Race*, she has noticed that she is more culturally aware. She mentioned that she finds herself reviewing the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) data by race (e.g., subgroups) and is open to various perspectives. Miss Ryan noted, “I am more aware of race. My knowledge of race has certainly been heightened. As a result of this awareness, I am now looking at Connecticut’s Mastery Test data by race and gender.” In addition, teachers noted that seeing color has also manifested itself in lesson design and instruction. The teachers reported that the selection of curriculum materials is more intentional as a result of their participation in *CC About Race*. Miss Vaughters added, “I make more of a conscious effort to use both representations of pictures and prints to make my lessons more culturally relevant.” She further commented that the follow-up activities have made her more comfortable discussing the race of students (e.g., Black, Brown, and White) instead of saying that she does not see their color. Teachers further mentioned that they are reflecting more on their own teaching style to ensure that it is culturally relevant, and

they are speaking more openly about race. They noted that they are sharing information about their own cultures with students and asking students questions about their cultures as a way of building relationships and rapport with students.

Mr. Mathews noted that many of the stories read in class are about characters from different countries. He further stated, “I am noticing that I am asking students to validate the settings and characters.” In addition, Mr. Mathews shared that many of his students are from Haiti and Mexico. He pointed out that he asks students such questions as, “Does this look like the Mexico or the Haiti where you are from?” “How is it the same or how is it different?” He followed up by saying that the majority of curriculum materials being used by schools are written from the perspective of White middle-class men and do not reflect the diversity of the students.

One of the guiding principles of *CC About Race* is the belief that racial equity transformation begins with an individual at a personal level. Participants are asked to keep the conversations at a personal, local, and immediate level by using “I” and/or “me” instead of referring to students and families as “they and/or them.” Mrs. Cohen shared that *CC About Race* has given her permission to seek clarity when conversations are being had about students and families. “I find myself using my inter-personal skills to paraphrase and to probe further.” Examples of her paraphrasing may sound something like, “I think that you are asking if Black students . . .” or “I think that you are feeling that Black students . . .” She noted that she wanted to get others to name the student or family, instead of using “they” and “them.”

CC About Race begins with an inward journey within self—an internal reflection of self and our own racial perspectives and experiences and how they may have

perpetuated a racial achievement gap. Miss Stewart noted that she is more self-reflective. “I am asking myself more questions from the perspective of a Black woman.” Miss Stewart concluded, “I am more aware of who I am as a person of color and my own biases that I may bring to the classroom.”

The second condition of *CC About Race* encourages participants to isolate race while acknowledging the broader scope of diversity and the variety of factors that contribute to a racialized problem (Singleton & Linton, 2006a). This condition focuses on the critical need to address race explicitly and intentionally. Moreover, educators are asked to discuss the impact of race on students’ achievement by having courageous conversations about race in order to examine school practices, curriculum, instruction, and assessment through the lenses of race.

As a conductor orchestrates the melodious sounds of each instrument, so too must educators facilitate the learning of all students. Facilitating learning means creating and directing learning situations and environments where all ethnicities are accepted. When teaching minority children, Ladson-Billings (1994) notes the importance of recognizing the difference in color and culture, but not letting these characteristics interfere with instructing these children. Being color-blind is not a feasible solution to educating minority children of today, she says.

Ladson-Billings (1994) goes on to say, “If teachers pretend not to see students’ racial and ethnic differences, they really do not see the students at all and are limited in their ability to meet their educational needs” (pp. 312-320). Embracing these attributes and infusing them into the everyday curriculum are indicators of success and high achievement, especially where minority children are represented.

Infusion of cultural aspects requires subject matter be taught through the diverse perspectives of each child. Children can and will learn important concepts while incorporating cultural diversity into daily lessons and the overall curriculum. In fact, when educating minority children, the likelihood of higher achievement is greater. Effective educators take these things into account and masterfully create lessons that address ethnicities, differentiate instruction, and assess student learning in multiple ways.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) begins with the notion that race is a normal part of society and in many facets of life it cannot and should not be avoided (Delgado, 1995). Understanding the general aspects of the cultural group involved in a study, the researcher must analyze how personal characteristics affect the fieldwork and the relationships with the individual participants they encounter (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). “White students, in particular, often struggle with the strong feeling of guilt when they become aware of the pervasiveness of racism in our society” (Tatum, 2009, pp. 277-278). Tatum discusses that understanding the development of one’s racial identity can lead to conversations and opportunities to talk to others with similar experiences with Three Models of Whiteness: the “actively racist White supremacist,” the “what Whiteness,” and the “guilty White” (pp. 284-285). Using these models in the analysis of the data and using race as an analytical tool, the construction of identity reveals constraints and conflicts within the past and present experiences of individuals. Within this exposure, biological, emotional, and personal realizations are revealed.

Critical Race Theory, initially created as a body of legal theory, is an organizing framework useful in understanding human behavior and social processes relevant to racial group categorizations and racial stratification. CRT examines the oppressive

dynamics of society in order to inform individuals and groups in order for social transformation to occur. Rather than embracing a color-blind perspective, CRT places race at the center of the analysis and provides a critical perspective on how racial stratification continues to influence the lives of racial/ethnic minorities in the United States. CRT focuses on the concept of race as a social construct, and on ways in which the construct has been used to maintain the relative privilege and power of some groups, with respect to other groups. It is an approach that seeks to transform the relationships among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

According to Bonilla-Silva (2003a), color-blind refers to the belief that race does not matter in a social context or that it is neutral in a social context. Color-blindness keeps people from raising concerns and questioning the value of race and racial inequalities in daily experiences. Similarly, those who hold a color-blind view are essentially ignoring race and helping to perpetuate racism in society. Some people claim that a person of color is playing the “race card” or using “identity politics” to push racial matters into situations where they believe they simply do not apply.

There are “four frames” of color-blindness: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003b). Abstract liberalism is when people apply abstract or de-contextualized ideas about people of color, such as being supportive of equal opportunity, but in reality what happens is a rationalization for racially unfair situations or opportunities. Naturalization uses the belief that things are the way they are because it is “natural.” This explanation is used often when a White person is explaining the existence of racially or ethnically distinct neighborhoods, the limited contact between Whites and people of color, or why there are clear differences in

academic success between Whites and some other racial groups. Cultural racism is when people believe that people are supposed to stick with their own culture in social situations and is used to justify people's positions of power in society. Minimization of racism states that racism no longer exists because it is not in the legal system anymore and life is fine now. Therefore, people believe that racism is really not the cause of social injustice but the individuals or particular racial group's own doing such as a "bad attitude," or not a very good work ethic. This attitude results in the belief that everyone is treated equally (Bonilla-Silva, 2003b).

Examples of Color-Blindness in the Classroom

1. *"I'm not prejudiced, I don't notice any differences in these kids, I treat them all the same" (Tatum, 1999).*

The above quote is an excerpt from an interview conducted by Beverly Tatum and is a classic example of how teachers are ignoring race in their classrooms. When teachers say they "don't notice any differences in these kids," they are trying to convey their unbiased ideology towards their students. When a teacher implements this in the classroom however, he/she is causing more harm than good. By treating students the same way, a teacher is actually ignoring the cultural and ethnic differences that exist between the students. Teachers may impose their own culture and ethnic background on their students without having an understanding of their students' needs. This way of teaching can hold some students back and may be the cause for why some students get labeled with learning disabilities.

In Frank Fingarsen's (2006) piece, "Why Do You Force Your Ways?," he talks about a seemingly troublesome student, Matthew, who just did not want to learn.

According to his teacher, Matthew's "school work was dismal," "his work was of poor

quality, his study habits were atrocious, and his attitude towards school was even worse” (pp. 96-97). Fingarsen was determined to change his student’s ways, however, and when he met with Matthew’s father, it was Matthew’s father who actually changed Fingarsen’s ways.

Fingarsen (2006) believed that Matthew could not learn because whatever method he used seemed to fail. Fingarsen had assumed that his student had a learning disability and that his attitude meant he did not care about learning. He met with Matthew’s father to discuss the situation and the meeting turned out to be pivotal for both teacher and student. Matthew’s father pointed out that his son was not learning because Fingarsen was not using Matthew’s experience to relate to the materials in class. Fingarsen realized he had imposed his own values and ways of learning onto his student. If he wanted Matthew to learn, he would have to relate the material in class to that of Matthew’s background and not his own.

Matthew’s story is a great example of how teachers use color-blindness in the classroom without realizing the harmful effects it can have on students. By ignoring his student’s culture, Fingarsen (2006) was led to believe that his student was in need of remedial help. Without becoming aware of his biases, Fingarsen may have continued to treat Matthew as a remedial student, which could have had detrimental consequences, such as Matthew losing interest in school or being placed in special education.

2. *“I Treat Students as if They’re Like My Own Children”* (Delpit, 1990).

It is not uncommon to hear teachers use this phrase when asked how they treat their students. Teachers may feel comparing their students to their own children proves they do not treat students with a certain bias. As well-intentioned as this statement may

be, it also implies that teachers expect their students to have the same knowledge and background as their own children, and in theory, themselves. For many White teachers working in pre-dominantly non-White school systems, the misconception that students have the same knowledge as their own children can lead to many obstacles. When teachers instruct their students based on what they believe, they should already know some students may get left behind. In other words, “the child who did not come to school already primed with what was to be presented would be labeled as needing ‘remedial’ instruction from day one; indeed, this determination would be made before he or she was ever taught” (Delpit, 1990, p. 91). Students as early as kindergarten get held back due to this type of approach.

By taking this approach, teachers are not recognizing differences in culture and again may impose their own culture onto their students. For example, if a White student threw a book on the floor and the White teacher asked the student whether or not the book belonged on the floor, the White student would most likely pick up on the cue to pick up the book or get in trouble. A student from a different culture may not comprehend a subtle hint and may take the question at face value, leading them to not pick up the book. Something so simple could lead to some students getting labeled as troublemakers when in fact it could be something as simple as a more direct response from the teacher such as “please pick up the book.” Because of the cultural difference between a teacher and a student, a student may not pick up on these veiled commands (Delpit, 1990, p. 93) and as a result could be labeled as having behavioral problems.

3. Just Another “Kid Put-down” (Lewis, 2001).

Amanda E. Lewis (2001) found clear examples of color-blind racism from the ethnographic case study that she conducted at Foresthills Elementary. Lewis’s study found that White students learn racist thoughts and behaviors from their parents and schooling ideology. Color-blind racism was most apparent when racial conflicts occurred between students as well as explaining the multicultural curriculum of the school. For example, when the only biracial child in a fourth-grade class was called “N . . .” by a White student and soon after “Blackie” by another White student, the teachers and principal explained to Lewis that the child was “misunderstanding” the significance of race in these situations. The teacher further explained that the child would often play the “race card” in her reasons why she didn’t like school. The teachers were minimizing racism by explaining that the child misunderstood the comments and by claiming that race was not the reason for the child’s unhappiness. By not taking the opportunity to educate the children on the harmful effect of the words used, the children were left with no understanding of what racism or racist acts are. This example demonstrates the teacher’s tolerance for the use of racial slurs as just being like another “kid put-down” (Lewis, 2001). The biracial child was viewed by the teachers as the one who had the problem and was making a big deal out of nothing. Acts such as this can lead a child to lose interest in school, detach from others, and decrease his/her academic performance.

Color-blindness ideologies held by teachers are rooted in the claim that teachers do not see color, but just children. A teacher from a different school claimed that she “would not even be able to tell how many African-American, Latino or Asian students she had in her class because she just did not ‘notice’ such things” (Lewis, 2001, p. 792).

Later in the same interview the teacher explained she felt that Blacks and Latinos did not have the same sense of success or concept of what success is compared to White and Asian students. As often occurs with color-blind ideology, the teacher who claimed not to see race also held racial biases based on stereotypes. She claimed to support equal treatment of all her students, but at the same time she separates the meaning of success by racial groups.

The teacher's lack of support for multi-cultural education was another example of the color-blind ideology used at Foresthills Elementary. As part of Lewis's (2001) ethnographic study, she posed questions about the multicultural curriculum in the school. The teachers' and principal responded that their school was not diverse, therefore, race was not an issue and multi-cultural activities were not important for their students. This finding demonstrates the color-blind view that race is only an issue for people of color. The teachers' and principal's color-blindness was being used as a reason for not incorporating cultural, ethnic, or racial differences in their curriculum, thus limiting the education of their students. Without a multi-cultural curriculum, students do not learn how to view the world through different lenses, which can lead to the continuation of institutional racism through the education system. A multi-cultural curriculum places value on race, ethnicity, and cultural practices that allows students to appreciate differences in our society. The standard curriculum can help perpetuate the belief that White cultures and lessons are the only ones of value and are the "right" lessons to teach. The color-blind ideologies of teachers are further supported within the curriculum and classroom resources, including textbooks, toys, lesson plans, and large-group activities.

Color-blindness is also prevalent in most school curriculums as well as many lesson plans and student activities. Teachers do not recognize the diversity in their classroom and implement lessons that cater primarily to White middle-class students. Many teachers in elementary and middle schools focus on a curriculum that is geared to White students and, as a result, students of color develop tendencies of dissatisfaction with school because they feel that the material presented is not relevant to them.

In the current curriculum, teachers focus on the basic subjects such as mathematics, reading/language arts, science, and social studies. Teachers do not focus on nor implement multiculturalism in their classrooms. Many feel they are being sensitive to both students of color as well as White students by the textbooks they use in their classrooms. Most textbooks have pictures portraying White students studying as well as being the heroes throughout history. The problem with these textbooks is that they solidify racial stereotypes in children and are an example of tokenism. In many textbooks, the portrayal of students of color is not accurate, which can be seen as another example of perpetuating stereotypes. For example, in many children's books, students of color are depicted as having really bad hair or exaggerated lips.

Even though research has demonstrated that the current curriculum taught in the educational system can be detrimental to the development of children, it continues to be used throughout the country. Changing the curriculum to add multiculturalism would be like opening Pandora's Box. Many teachers are not ready for that change, and others fear the questions that may arise in their classrooms. Many find it easier to follow a curriculum that has been implemented from previous years than having to integrate a new one where one may not be prepared for the challenges. In addition, many teachers are not

equipped with the necessary knowledge to bring multiculturalism into their classroom and others feel that it is not necessary due to their color-blind approach.

Due to the use of color-blind teaching in schools, students, particularly White students, learn to “mask” or “disregard” race, while simultaneously absorbing the racially based stereotypes as facts. The color-blind approach teaches children that racism is over and therefore they are unable to recognize the institutional inequalities that people of color face. Students do not learn the historical and present racism that allows for the inequalities to exist. Instead, students learn to put the blame on the individual and adopt the belief that we all have the same opportunity to succeed. For example, many White students put the blame on people of color for the achievement gap in the educational system.

Color-blindness can have psychologically damaging effects on children in the classroom and beyond, specifically on those who are marginalized by their ethnicity. One major psychological effect that color-blindness has on children is a loss of identity. When people do not recognize who you are and your differences from other students it can create a very stressful environment and cause students of color to question their identity and try to fit in with mainstream White society. Most of us find our identity based on how other people perceive us. People of color are constantly being left out of school textbooks and popular media, which ultimately reinforces White society as the norm. When people of color are portrayed through these outlets, it is usually in a negative way. Most color-blind teachers do not realize that they represent some races and ethnicities in a negative way or don't recognize them at all, and this can leave students feeling left out. It is

important for teachers to understand the importance of identity development in their students and how it differs for students due to their culture.

Bonilla-Silva (2003a) and Tatum (1997) remind us that our failure to engage in a conversation about race and to suggest that we now reside in a color-blind society is problematic and potentially destructive. Such shortcomings only further silence the voices of those on the margins who continually seek inclusion in schools and society.

Teacher Mis-Match

Teachers in general have to realize that they are going to continue to come into contact with students whose cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial, and social class backgrounds differ from their own. Furthermore, United States schools continue to become learning spaces where an increasingly homogeneous teaching population (e.g., mostly White, female, and middle class) comes into contact with an increasingly heterogeneous student population (e.g., primarily students of color from low-income backgrounds).

The next theme that emerged for the analysis of the data was *Teacher Mis-Match*. Cultural mis-match can be defined as a discrepancy between the conditions, needs, and means of the people, based largely upon the culture one is brought up in and the inability of another to relate to that particular upbringing (Latham, 1999). One such cultural mis-match researched was that of teachers and students:

A cultural mis-match among African American school students and their teachers, due to diverse values, norms, and expectations, often provokes inappropriate teacher response to student conduct, thereby inciting disruptive student behavior. The management of this diversity, when the environment is devoid of a teacher's sensitivity to the student's life, can impact student's behavior, and ultimately, initiate alternative school referral. (Berger, 2006, p. 832)

Teachers in the study were asked to share their perspectives on ways they feel that the cultural background and prior experience of a teacher influenced their decisions to refer a Black student to special education. Teachers shaped the foundation for this theme by noting that the majority of the teachers in Connecticut are White, female, and from middle-class backgrounds. Moreover, teachers reported that there is a mis-match between student and teacher. Specifically, they commented that teachers are mostly from middle-class backgrounds, while the student population is Black or of color and from low-income backgrounds. They further noted that the cultural background of a teacher is important.

Teachers also felt that there are pre-conceived ideas and assumptions about students and families. Mr. Trapper noted, “Teachers need to be culturally aware of their students. If teachers do not have the understanding of various cultural backgrounds, there is a strong possibility that assumptions and judgments will be made about students. There is a disconnection between the student and teacher.” Teachers further shared that there is a cultural mis-match between teachers and students. Mr. Mathews acknowledged that the cultural awareness of a teacher is important. He further commented, “A teacher does not necessarily need to be of color to teach students of color, but they need to have a clear understanding of their own culture and understand the various cultures of their students.”

Miss Brown pointed out, “There is a mis-match between teacher and student population and mis-perception about cultures.” Miss Griffin reported, “A teacher’s background is critical to a Black student being referred to special education. As teachers, we teach who we are and see things through our individual lenses and experiences. To some degree, I feel that many teachers attempt to rid a student of their own individual

cultures.” She followed up with, “Some teachers want students of color to conform to their ways of thinking and behaviors.” Mrs. Griffin felt that many teachers do not know anything about the culture of their students. Teachers do not take the necessary time to get to know students in order to build relationships and to learn about their cultures.”

In addition, teachers in this study confirmed that the background of a teacher is critical. “Many teachers expressed that as teachers, we teach who we are—middle-class White teachers.” Miss Vaughters mentioned, “I feel that some teachers may try to rid students of their individual cultures—to assimilate to the dominant culture.” Teachers noted that many of the teachers in their schools/districts are White and do not take the time to get to know their students of color and their families. A majority of the teachers interviewed see a teacher’s background as being critical to a Black student being referred to special education. It was further noted that some teachers also feel that they are helping Black students by referring them to special education. However, there can be a long-term negative impact for those students. The label that we give students is forever. It was further noted that there are teachers who have never had experiences with Black students and families prior to teaching in this district.

Teachers in the study shared that there is an unwillingness of teachers to teach all students. Miss Johnson maintained, “Schools are not designed for Black students.” She continued, “Special education is a superficial means of addressing the real issue of race.” Miss Johnson further noted that the racial “elephant” needs to be put on the table for discussion. Teachers reported that racism is alive in schools. However, it has taken on other forms of segregation from the mainstream such as tracking, grouping practices, and

special education—keeping students of color from receiving an equitable education in the general education classroom environment.

Teachers were surprised that the over-representation of Black students in special education has been a persistent concern for more than 40 years. Teachers shaped this theme by noting that *CC About Race* has provided them with a different perspective of the over-representation of Black students in special education. They reported that the seminars have caused a greater understanding of the intersection between race and education. Feelings that assumptions have been made about Black students' ability to learn and achieve were evident in my interviews with teachers.

Teachers in the study overall expressed that a teacher's cultural background experience significantly contributes to Black students being referred to special education. They felt that the understanding of cultural differences, norms, values, and behaviors by the teacher helps to reduce the number of students of color being referred to special education. Mr. Mathew maintained, "Many teachers have limited experience with other cultures and come with their own biases and assumptions."

Miss Ellis pointed out that she saw a teacher's background as being critical to a Black student being referred to special education. She mentioned that there are teachers who have never had experiences with Black students and families prior to teaching in this district. Miss Ellis shared that she regretted to admit that in many cases she was working from what she thought she knew, based on college, professional development trainings, experiences, and conversations with colleagues. She concluded, "I think that there is a fear that comes over teachers that something has to be done."

Teachers in the study continued to make the point that, as teachers, they teach according to what they know about their own culture and norms. Conversely, Miss Sutton noted, “Teachers need to know how to make instructional changes and believe in their students and their families.” She followed up by stating that teachers have to take the time to get know their students, both academically and on a social-emotional level. Miss Sutton asserted that building relationships with students and families is important. She concluded that teachers must be able to reflect on their method of instruction and specific strategies. In addition, they need to learn about the culture of their students.

Miss Norwood pointed out, “The prior knowledge and cultural experience are critical.” She explained that she has been teaching in the district for the past 20-plus years. Miss Norwood grew up in the town where she teaches and has seen the changes. She passionately shared that she had to embrace the changes in the diversity of the school’s student body. Miss Norwood noted that she is a better teacher today because she was open to the diverse cultures of students and families.

Ladson-Billings (1995) noted that the contrasting teacher-and-student demographics often lead to a “cultural mis-match” in which an increasing number of teachers lack familiarity with cultural values, norms, and belief systems of their students. The cultural background and experience of a teacher are very important. Comparing demographic data between teachers and students, significant differences appear in the United States. Eighty-six percent of American pre-service teachers are from European backgrounds. It is predicted that, by the year 2020, student populations will include predominately non-White students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (Gay & Howard, 2000). The researchers further noted that if the trend of European background

teachers continues, the great teacher-student mismatch will persist. Such a mismatch between student and teacher demographics poses challenges for teachers to meet the needs of so many diverse learners (Milner, 2005). Researchers contended that many White educators have not acquired the necessary experiential and educational background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002).

The mis-match between student and teacher backgrounds accounts for differential expectations as teachers struggle to understand the many backgrounds and abilities of the students in their classrooms (Saft & Pianta, 2001). As Saft and Pianta found, the greater the difference in background between the student and teacher, the more likely students were to be referred for counseling. Such findings suggest that a level of comfort develops between those with similar backgrounds. When students and teachers have similar backgrounds, they tend to be more willing to find strategies within the classroom to facilitate teacher-student interactions.

Most educators envision 21st-century schools as learning communities upon which student differences are appreciated and capitalized. Effective teacher educators must respond by preparing prospective and practicing teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions aligned with maximizing the learning of all students. In fact, “the myth of the average learner has been shattered and teachers are recognizing the need to individualize and honor the unique profiles of all students” (Kluth, Straut, & Biklen, 2003, p. 19).

Teacher educators need to prepare pre-service university students to enter a classroom with the knowledge and resources to work with all school-aged children.

Referring to children in preschool through high-school environments, Kugelmass (2001) states:

In schools with diverse student populations, poor educational performance is greater among children from low-income, non-European American families than among more affluent and/or dominant culture students. Within these schools, poor and minority children are also over-represented among those classified for special education and placed in separate special education classes. (p. 180)

Thus, teachers struggle to conceptualize the needs of students of different cultural backgrounds and/or socioeconomic status, which can result in detrimental practices. As such, teacher educators need to enable prospective teachers to be able to enter the classroom and maximize the learning of all children, not just those of similar backgrounds. Recent scholarship on creating inclusive settings provides insight into how teacher educators can establish environments and communities for all children. Once they understand inclusive practices, pre-service teachers may not be as profoundly affected by the mis-match between their students' and their own backgrounds.

In a 1997 interview, Patton described teachers as “cultural agents” and their responsibility to students in this role.

Teachers need to understand that they are cultural agents; they bring their own culture to the classroom and it influences how they perceive their students and how students perceive them. They also need to be aware that their students are cultural agents. Unfortunately, many teachers may either deny the role culture plays in their classrooms or they are unaware of its importance. Lack of cultural awareness is problematic when teachers and students have different cultural backgrounds. When lack of understanding and lack of respect exists, conflicts emerge. (Brownell & Walter-Thomas, 1997, p. 119)

Teachers today are faced with an overwhelming task of teaching an ever-increasing population of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). The greater the differences in background between the student and teacher, the more likely students were referred. Such findings suggest that a level of

comfort develops between those with similar backgrounds. When students and teachers have similar backgrounds, they tend to be more willing to find strategies within the classroom to facilitate teacher-student interactions (Saft & Pianta, 2001).

Gay (1994) maintained that teachers think that their own values, beliefs, and action are the norm, and that what they know and what they teach is governed by learned principles rather than informed and sympathetic understanding. She argued that because of this lack of understanding, teachers can engage, consciously or unconsciously, in mis-education practices.

As the United States endures its largest influx of immigrants, along with the increasing number of U.S.-born ethnic minorities, the nation must be prepared to make the necessary adjustments to face the changing ethnic texture of its citizens (Banks, 2002). The shift in ethnic demographics has important implications for schools and, more importantly, for the classroom teacher.

When dealing with students from any different racial group, it is important to understand the cultural aspects of that particular group. African-American students are often viewed as being hostile in the education sphere and non-compliant (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Actually, many students who are viewed as being hostile are not hostile in any way. There are social-context clues that many teachers and adults miss and mix. According to Watkins and Kurtz, the issue of discrimination from White teachers toward African American students exists and is a problem. Many times African American students are misunderstood through their body language and comments. Some educators believe that when an African American child is talkative or outspoken, he or she has a behavior problem, which leads to issues of over-representation.

Fifty years after *Brown vs. Board of Education* desegregated schools in an attempt to equalize the social inequities facing African American students, they continue to be underprivileged compared to their White counterparts in what remained largely segregated schools (Orfield, 2001). Presently, students of color, with the exception of some Asian groups, are at a distinct disadvantage. African American and Latino students are more likely to drop out of school, obtain poor grades, occupy non-academic tracks, and score lower on standardized tests, when compared to White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Largely homogeneous teaching forces serve a base of students with a variety of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, racial, and socioeconomic differences. Research suggests that many teachers are not prepared to deal with these growing groups of diverse students. Questions are raised by researchers about the ability of the current teaching force to adequately meet the needs of the growing number of students of color in the schools.

When examining race as a factor in differential treatment of students, there is evidence that African American students are subject to this differential treatment. African American students are treated less positively by teachers, are less likely to be labeled “gifted,” and are subjected to more discrimination from teachers than are White students (McCormick & Noriega, 1986). In the primary grades, teachers rate Black children as having more behavior problems and fewer academic competencies in the first 2 years of school (Sbarra & Pianta, 2001). Talbert-Johnson (2001) noted that general education systems still operate from a Eurocentric perspective and that educators are not often equipped to deal with different cultures, lifestyles, and values in their classrooms.

Grossman (1995) concluded that prejudice and discrimination against non-European Americans and lower income students is rampant and that much of the prejudice is unconscious. Additionally, Artiles (1998) remarked, “Ethnic minority groups have been traditionally seen as ‘problem people’ and that discrimination, prejudice and racism are subtly and openly enacted every day in our country” (p. 32). During the study, only one participant remarked that the over-representation in her school district could be caused by racism.

There is a substantial body of literature about the kinds of instruction/pedagogy that best meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas, 1991). Classroom teachers who utilize culturally relevant pedagogy as a framework for their instruction build upon “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, pp. 73-74). Culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the premise that the ways in which people learn differ across cultures. In order to maximize learning opportunities for all students, teachers must gain knowledge about the cultures represented in their classrooms. Then, they need to translate this knowledge into their instructional practice (Villegas, 1991).

Tatum stated to Sparks (2004, p. 49) that academic success of students of color was critically dependent on quality relationships with their teachers and the other adults in school. Ladson-Billings (1994) concurs in *Dreamkeepers*. Teachers with the ability to cultivate relationships and get to know their students beyond the boundaries of the

classroom were more effective. Other research studies (Gay, 2000) supported Ladson-Billings (1994).

Ferguson (2003) noted that content, pedagogy, and relationships affect how well ethnic and racial minority students learn. He contends that research has found that students' relationship with their teachers differs by their backgrounds and affects their overall academic achievement. Sather and Henze (2001) concluded that understanding the students who walk within the hallways of schools is as important as the level of skills each teacher brings with him or her. Building positive relationships can be linked to increased student achievement. Schools can improve racial relations between principals, teachers, parents, students, and the community by building bridges across the great racial gap, thus implying the importance of reaching and developing strong interpersonal relationships before teaching (Sather & Henze, 2001). The concept of caring has long played a key role in making connections and reaching Black students. It allows educators time to gain insights into the background and lives of the students they serve. This form of individual and cultural examination leads to stronger ties to improve human relationships and increase student achievement.

Research has shown that when teachers have developed caring and supportive interpersonal relationships with students, they have more positive academic attitudes, and are more satisfied with school (Felner et al., 1997). In addition, students with caring and supportive teachers are more engaged academically (Voelkl, 1995).

Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development

The next theme that emerged from analysis of the rich data was *Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development*, with the following subheadings: (a) Professional Development on Different Cultures; and (b) Professional Development on Special Education. Professional development for teachers (i.e., staff development, in-service education, continuing education, teacher training) is an experience shaped by the willingness and readiness for change by educators, families, and other stakeholders. There is no single "ideal" model that meets every school's/district's needs and requirements. The diversity of cultures and the uniqueness of concerns are thus acknowledged and valued. Effective professional development is an essential and indispensable process, without which schools and programs cannot hope to achieve their desired goals for student achievement. Never before in the history of education has there been a greater recognition of the importance of professional development.

Teachers in this study shared that many schools and teachers are not prepared to meet an ever-changing diverse population of students. They noted that *CC About Race* affirmed a need for ongoing professional training about different cultures. They commented that the seminars brought to the surface a need for training to assist teachers with effective instructional strategies and an understanding of different cultures, norms, and values. Teachers maintained that there is a significant need for professional development in the areas of race, diversity, culturally relevant instruction, and racial equity.

Mrs. Griffin noted that there is a need for teacher training—more targeted professional development. Furthermore, Miss Cohen contended that additional teacher

training on Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) needed to be provided to teachers and schools. Miss Vaughters commented, “Teacher training is essential. Training specifically needed to be provided on different cultures.” Miss Ryan pointed out that “our classrooms are more diverse and ever-changing. Teacher training is needed to meet the changing demands.” Cohen expressed the need for additional resources for curriculum materials, teacher training on CRT.

The demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation have led to changes in school curriculum and instruction. Schools are being held accountable for the improved achievement of all students. However, meeting the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is a major challenge for most teachers.

Professional Development on Different Cultures

Several teachers maintained that schools need to discuss cultural differences, linguistic, and racial biases in the referral and assessment processes in order to ensure that students are being served appropriately. Teachers reported that ELL students are automatically referred to special education based on language alone. Mrs. Vitale noted, “Students are referred to special education because of language and low reading skills.” Teachers reported that there is confusion as to whether or not a student has a language issue or a disability. They noted that this was also an area of need for professional development.

Miss Stewart stated, “Teachers need ongoing sustained professional development.” She followed up by adding, “Assumptions and decisions are made every day about students based on the ethnicity of students.” Teachers also maintained that the

student's appearance, where the child lives, and language that is spoken at home can justify a referral to special education. Miss Green followed up by adding, "I am a better teacher today because I am open to the diverse cultures of my students and families." She further noted that there is a need for school districts to provide more professional development on distinguishing disabilities from cultural differences and language.

Teachers in the study shaped this theme by sharing that many teachers and schools as a whole have placed extremely low expectations upon Black students. Feelings that assumptions have been made regarding a Black student's ability to learn and achieve, based solely on their skin color, socioeconomic status, and behaviors were evident. Miss James further maintained, "Low expectations, assumptions, and names determine the placement of students."

Teachers described their experience with *CC About Race* as affirming a need for additional cultural awareness and diversity training for general and special education teachers. They also discussed a need to look at recruitment efforts to attract more teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds. Teachers also mentioned that there is a need for additional training on various cultures. They asserted that there are many unconscious practices in schools that are racist. Teachers reported that their colleges and universities did not prepare them with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to educate diverse learners. They maintained a need for additional professional development on different cultures. Several noted that teacher training is essential.

Miss Norwood noted that there is a need for additional training on various cultures. She further remarked, "There are many practices in schools that are racist; some I feel are conscious and others unconscious (e.g., tracking, grouping practices)." Teachers

need ongoing professional development in order to increase their cultural awareness.

Mrs. Carter commented that she would recommend that Connecticut provide additional funding to schools in order for them to purchase curriculum materials that represent the diversity all of our students. She further mentioned that the state should provide ongoing training for teachers on different cultures. There needs to be a revision of the Connecticut Mastery Test to reflect culturally responsive teaching and the diversity in our schools.

In today's schools, teachers must be prepared to teach a diverse population of students. Incorporating the student's social, cultural, and language backgrounds, when planning and implementing lessons, promotes an increase in academic achievement. Therefore teachers need to have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to create democratic classrooms and to implement a culturally responsive and inclusive curriculum (Gay, 2000). Teacher education faculties have traditionally mirrored the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of their students. Teacher educators are overwhelmingly White (Grant & Gillette, 1987). Teacher education has begun to recognize that racial and ethnic diversity among faculty is imperative when preparing teachers for diverse classrooms (Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 2000).

Professional Development on Race and the Special Education Process

Teachers in this study maintained that "there is a need for professional development on race and the special education process." They further shared that there is still confusion about the special education process and its purpose. Several teachers commented that there is a need to seriously take a look at the issues of racism in schools. Teachers further noted, "As educators, we need to take a holistic view at students to ensure that they are in fact in need of special education before they are actually labeled."

They shared that the state should look at recruiting more teachers of color. In addition, teachers should intervene earlier—third grade is too late.

Miss Ellis mentioned that training is needed in the process for equity in special education. It was further noted by Miss Brown that there is a need for additional training on diversity and race issues for special and general education teachers. Mr. Tripper declared that all schools needed to participate in *CC About Race*. He stated, “There is so much that schools and teachers do not know.”

Large numbers of African American students are being persistently diagnosed as disabled and placed in special education programs. For many, these students are inappropriately placed. A large percentage of African American students fall into the labeled categories of mild mental disability, learning disability, and serious emotional or behavioral disability (J. Patton, 1998). In fact, Zhang and Katsiyannis (2002) reported that African Americans continue to have the highest representation of all groups of special education. The Office of Civil Rights argues that strong evidence shows the continuance of one primary disability category for the overall excess of African American children in high-incidence disability categories. This category is mental retardation. Furthermore, J. Patton (1998) states that it has been well documented that African American males are particularly over-represented both in disciplinary practices and in certain special education categories and typically receive their special education services in segregated classrooms or buildings. In addition, Patton states that the special education label borne by these students often serves as a stigma, producing a negative effect on the bearer of the label and others interacting with the stigmatized individual.

These students in special education programs miss essential general education academic and social curricula.

Oswald et al. (1999) noted that the number of court and monitoring actions have challenged and attempted to influence the evaluation and placement of students representing diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds, especially African Americans. This over-representation of African American students in special education programs can be found through “literature being filled with causal factors that range from failure of the general education system to inequities associated with the special education process” (J. Patton, 1998, pp. 25-30). IDEA (P.L.105-17) requires a school district to (a) report annually the extent of minority representation by disability category, (b) determine if significant disproportionality exists, and (c) if observed, review and revise policies, practices, and procedures in identification or placement to ensure that minority children are not inappropriately identified or served in more restrictive settings.

Recent investigations have suggested that minority representation in special education is linked to low income, discrimination, or cultural bias in referral and assessment, unique factors related directly to ethnicity, and/or school-based factors (Oswald et al., 1999). Because of these contributing factors, an over- and under-representation debate has developed that affects the referral, identification, and placement process of special-needs students. The debate continuously points to issues that are grounded in socio-culturally deprived children (Valles, 1998). These specific issues deal with race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, socioeconomic class, and language/dialect differences.

The intent of IDEA and other special education laws is and was to address the special and individual needs of students who do not appear to benefit from general education programs and services, including curriculum and instruction—to provide specialized services to students who require additional supports and different services beyond what is offered in the general education. In addition, IDEA was intended to both regulate and be applied to all children, regardless of disability category and severity, and regardless of demographic variables (i.e., race, gender, income, or socioeconomic status), the provision of educational services that are specific to their needs.

Reducing over-representation of children of African American descent in special education is a matter of a successful school environment and the ability to distinguish disabilities from so-called cultural differences (Meyer & Patton, 2001). The number of students with culturally diverse backgrounds, like African Americans, continues to increase every day in the school systems. Diversity in general may cause and present significant challenges for the educational world. Kea and Utley (1998) describe the seriousness of the eruption of social consciousness about the savage inequalities faced by minorities and poor children in many American urban schools. Schools that participate in these actions judge African American students as having learning deficits and limited potential and place these students disproportionately in low-track, remedial programs.

According to Banks (1992), multiculturalism education is a reform movement designed to bring about educational equity for all students, including those from different races, ethnic groups, social classes, exceptionality, and sexual orientation. How teachers perceive, believe, say, and do can disable or empower multicultural students with disabilities. All teachers must be knowledgeable about cultural diversity, even if they do

not teach in communities involving multiculturalism. As noted by Kea and Utley (1998), the lack of teacher awareness of their own ethnocentric views and their limited cultural competence regarding minority and diverse students inhibit their ability to effectively engage students and families from different backgrounds.

Current trends in public school enrollment and teacher characteristics (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2001) indicate the overwhelming probability that Black children will experience mostly White teachers in their education. At the same time, however, a review of the literature (Cooper, 2001) suggests that relatively little is known about effective White public school teachers of Black children. A notable exception are [*sic*] the three White teachers described in Ladson-Billings's (1994a) study of successful teachers of African American children. There is, however, a substantive and growing body of literature on effective Black teachers of Black children, which could be relied on to support White teachers in their efforts to teach across racial lines. Nonetheless, this research remains largely unaccounted for in the general literature on effective praxis. (Cooper, 2003, p. 413)

Ray-Taylor, Baskerville, Bruder, Bennett, and Schulte (2006) noted that when educators examine data about which students are not achieving, they may uncover underlying issues of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, the researchers mentioned that educators already have more data than they need. However, what is missing is the ownership of their students' data. The researchers concluded that professional development must focus not only on pedagogy and curriculum, but also on educators' relationships with and beliefs about students (Ferguson, 2002). Singleton and Linton (2006a) stated that discussions must be expanded to include other variables, such as socioeconomic class, language preference, and the relationship between race and student achievement and its impact on classroom practices.

In conclusion, teacher education programs and professional development efforts must prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students, namely Black students. These efforts must focus on teacher expectations in a myriad of forms (e.g., biases,

stereotypes, fears, etc.), so that deficit thinking and orientation are reduced and, ideally, eliminated. Teachers must participate in ongoing substantive self-reflection, and examine their biases toward and expectations of Black students. Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are White; most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay et al., 2003). Thus, many White educators simply have not acquired the experiential and education background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002).

Summary

In this study, teachers discussed how and in what ways their processes, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions have changed as a result of their school's/district's participation in SERC Program's, *CC About Race*. They spoke about being more open and comfortable discussing race and seeing the race of their students as oppose to saying, "I do not see color." Teachers expressed that *CC About Race* has also impacted their instruction and interaction with students. They shared that instruction is now more intentional and being planned more through the lenses of race.

The teachers spoke about the ever-changing demographics of our schools and that teachers are not being adequately prepared to meet the challenges. They expressed a need for ongoing professional development in the area of diversity and racial awareness. Teachers noted that there is a cultural disconnect between teachers and students. They discussed the impact of a teacher's experience and cultural background. It was noted that the majority of Connecticut's teaching workforce is White and from a middle-class

background. They spoke about racism and racist practices that are ingrained in the fabric of schools, and beliefs and assumptions about the abilities of Black students and their families.

Teachers in the study spoke passionately about their intent to do what is in the best interest of their students. They shared a desire to provide the extra support that students needed to be successful in the classroom. Teachers noted that many Black students are usually reading at a lower grade level and required additional support. Several noted that many Black students needed and benefitted from small-group instruction. They spoke of special education as a means of getting the extra support for students. Teachers discussed the use of data to see the color of students—to give the data a name and a face. They shared their own racial journey of self-discovery and the sometimes difficult conversations about race and racism.

Teachers discussed the importance of their being culturally competent in order to meet the demands of a changing diverse student population of students. Teachers questioned the purpose of special education and wondered why a student needed to be given a label in order to receive extra support. They discussed the dilemmas and challenges they encounter as teachers working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Several discussed the confusion that educators face in trying to distinguish a learning disability from a language issue.

This study has the potential to assist educators in examining local policies, practices, and philosophies regarding culturally responsive educational systems and to inform pedagogical, curricular, and assessment practices. J. Patton (2001) contended that the over-representation of Black students in special education is a matter of creating a

successful school environment for all students and accurately distinguishing disabilities from so-called cultural differences, political influences, and social-economic factors. He further stated that educators need to realize that the causes of low academic performance and challenging behavior do not reside solely within the child or his/her family.

While this study showed promise for identifying factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Black students in special education, engaging in courageous conversations about race is clearly not an institutionalized practice in schools (Singleton & Linton, 2006a). However, as we consider the statistical facts, it is difficult not to think about racial inequality as a predominant factor causing today's achievement gaps. It is our responsibility as educators to garner the courage to disaggregate and interpret the data through what Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2003) calls the "cultural eye." Only then can we engage in *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2006a).

Teacher education programs and professional development efforts must prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students, namely Black students. These efforts must focus on teacher expectations in a myriad of forms (e.g., biases, stereotypes, fears, etc.) so that deficit thinking and orientation are reduced and, ideally, eliminated. Teachers must participate in ongoing substantive self-reflection, and examine their bias relative to expectations of Black students.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The disproportionate representation of Black students in special education has been among the most persistent unsolved issues in the field of education, defying a simple explanation for its causes and remedies. The problem has been well documented in empirical literature, since Dunn's (1968) seminal article on the over-representation of minorities in special education. Yet, to date, many of the same problematic issues identified over four decades ago are still prevalent throughout all levels of education.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education?
2. How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*?

Research Design

Qualitative research, a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena as they appear in natural settings (J. Patton, 2001), is described as an umbrella concept covering an array of interpretative techniques to come to terms with the meaning, not the

frequency, of natural phenomena in the social world. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17) and, instead, the kind of research that produces findings arrived at from real-world settings where the phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally (J. Patton, 2001, p. 39). Qualitative research is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture, or lifestyles.

Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) was used to select participants who were informationally rich and able to provide useful information for addressing the research questions (J. Patton, 2001). Sixteen teachers from three school districts located in District Reference Group H were selected for this qualitative study and also participated in the SERC’s program, *Courageous Conversation About Race*. Other criteria for their eligibility were: teaching fourth grade 3 or more years; a balance of gender, race/ethnicity; and a considerable numbers of referrals of Black students to special education. Each teacher chosen for the study had more than 3 years’ teaching experience, and some had as many as 15 to 30 years’ teaching experience. The names of each of the teachers and research sites have been changed to protect their identities.

As previously noted, teachers selected to participate in the study were all from three school districts located in District Reference Group (DRG) H. Data collection consisted of interviews and a review of special education data submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education from schools in District Reference Group H, specifically, School District A, School District B, and School District C (see Appendix E for full DRGs description). District Reference Group (DRG) is a classification of districts

whose students' families are similar in education, income, occupation, and need, and that have roughly similar enrollment. The Connecticut State Board of Education approved DRG classification for purposes of reporting data other than student performance. DRGs are based on the following seven variables: income, education, occupation, family structure, poverty, home language, and district enrollment. They include nine groups from Group A (e.g., very affluent, low-need suburban districts) to Group I (e.g., high-need, low socioeconomic status urban districts).

The study included 16 semi-structured individual interviews with 16 fourth-grade teachers at their schools (Merriam, 1998) who participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Questions asked during the semi-structured interviews with teachers were open-ended to allow for in-depth responses. Some responses led to additional questions, which enabled the respondents to elaborate further on their answers, thereby adding to the richness of the descriptions contained in this analysis. A set protocol for all interviews was followed in an attempt to address the research questions, while still allowing for dialogue and discussion to take place. Merriam (1998) noted that as the researcher conducts interviews, the main purpose is to obtain information of a special kind (p. 71). Conducting interviews requires the researcher to listen to what people have to say about their activities, their feelings, and their lives (Eisner, 1998, p. 183).

I followed the process outlined by both Creswell (2003) and J. Patton (2001) for data analysis, which included identifying key words and phrases, organizing the information thematically, interpreting the meanings of phrases, and analyzing the meanings for what they revealed. The goal of this approach is to uncover the meaning

that an individual attributes to his or her understanding in a systematic way, using themes or clusters of data.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory suggested that over-representation cannot be solved without carefully considering how the racism experienced by Blacks drives the process (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Hilliard (1999) noted that the knowledge and skills to educate all children already exist. However, the will of society to teach all children is questionable. Hilliard further concluded that because we have lived historically in an oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which denies their political origin and meaning.

CRT is an approach that seeks to transform the relationship that exists among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Given the often subtle way in which race and racism operate, it is imperative that educational researchers explore the role of race when examining the educational experiences of Black students. CRT is a useful perspective from which to explore such phenomena.

This study discussed ways that the five prominent tenets of CRT, namely Counter Storytelling, Permanence of Racism, Whiteness as Property, Interest Convergence, and Critique of Liberalism, can be helpful in illuminating institutional policies, practices, and structures that promote racism and racial inequity in schools, specifically as they relate to the referral of Black students to special education.

The data revealed that four of the five prominent tenets of CRT were evident in the results of interviews with teachers. The specific tenets included, Counter Storytelling, Permanence of Racism, Interest Convergence, and Critique of Liberalism.

Counter Storytelling focuses on a narrative that shines the spotlight on racism to counter accepted notions or myths held by members of the majority culture. Teachers in this study spoke negatively about students and their families. They appeared to not feel the need to filter their comments. Teachers shared that many families do not care about their students or their education. Furthermore, the teachers in this study mentioned that families are never available to attend parent/teacher conferences, or other school events. In an attempt to counter comments made by teachers, I asked if they ever considered that many Black families have to work two and three jobs in order to support their children and to make ends meet? The comments from teachers seemed to be based on stereotypes and their own personal beliefs, values, and norms.

Another one of the basic premises of CRT is the permanence of racism in society or as Bell (1992) states, “Racism is a permanent component of American life” (p. 13). Many of teachers’ comments in this study were embedded with the permanence of racism. Teachers in this study had low expectations of Black students and seemed to think that they could not achieve high academic standards. Teachers mentioned that many Black students needed a different curriculum, other than the high-quality curriculum that other students are receiving. They also made assumptions about Black students (e.g., Black students do not belong in gifted programs, Black students are referred to special education in order to get the extra support and help they need). Teachers in this study seemed to be unaware of their own racial consciousness, prejudices, and biases.

The next tenet of CRT is interest convergence or self-interest. Bell (1980) contends that these very basic rights came only inasmuch as they converged with the self-interests of Whites. Citing the limited and uncertain gains of the *Brown* decision, Bell

articulated that losses in terms of human capital by way of the dismissal of scores of Black teachers and administrators, school closings in Black neighborhoods, and the limited access to high-quality curricula in the form of tracking, inflated admissions criteria, and other factors, have made the so-called “gains” from *Brown* questionable. Many teachers in this study mentioned that Black students are usually referred to special education to get the necessary help that they need. They discussed that Black students work best in small-group settings and benefit from one-on-one instruction. In referring Black students to special education, students will be essentially removed from the general education classroom. Teachers in turn would have smaller classes and be able to focus on those students who are reading on grade level, are well behaved, and are able to follow the norms and expectations of the classroom.

The last tenet of CRT is the critique of liberalism (Williams, 1997), as in (a) the notion of color-blindness; (b) neutrality of the law; and (c) incremental change. Equal opportunity for all without favoritism is a desirable goal to pursue; however, given the history of racism in the U.S., rights and opportunities were both awarded and withheld based almost exclusively on race. The notion of color-blindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as “Other.” There was evidence of the critique of liberalism in the interview responses of teachers in regard to the notion of color-blindness. Teachers in this study commented that they did not see the color of their students. All of the students were viewed as the same. Living in a politically correct society, teachers appeared to have thought that not seeing the color of their students was the most appropriate response to

make. However, they did not seem to realize that by saying that they did not see the color of their students was admitting that they do not see their students.

Results

This study used a qualitative research study method to examine how teachers described their working environment to provide services for students and how teachers described the ways they provide services for students has changed as a result of their school's/district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Several broad themes emerged from one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teachers. The four predominant themes that emerged included: (a) A Teacher's Dilemma; (b) I See Color Now; (c) Teacher Mis-Match; and (d) Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development.

Research Question #1: How do teachers describe the classroom challenges that lead them to refer students to special education? This question is answered primarily by the theme "A Teacher's Dilemma."

A Teacher's Dilemma

The teachers in this study described their work environment to provide services for students as one filled with complex decisions that rely on many different kinds of knowledge and judgment. On a daily basis you find them managing between three to four reading groups, teaching below-grade-level students, large class sizes, dealing with challenging student behaviors, school and district priorities, and federal mandates and regulations. The teachers in this study expressed that they constantly are being challenged with a range of dilemmas from designing differentiated lesson plans to meet the individual needs of their students, to the organization and management of their

classrooms. They are repeatedly in a dilemma regarding the implementation of various instructional strategies and methods to meet students' needs. The teachers noted that when students need extra support beyond what they can provide in the general education classroom, or when students are not making academic progress, they are in a dilemma as to what to do and which services would be most appropriate for the student.

The teachers in this study also reported that they are confronted every day with the dilemma of getting extra support for students who are not making progress in the general classroom setting. They further noted that special education was a means of getting additional academic support for struggling students. The teachers shared that many of their students required small-group or one-on-one instruction. Several teachers mentioned that they referred students to special education to get the necessary support they need. In addition, they contended that students of color are referred to special education because that it is the only way they will get the extra help needed.

Given that the average class size consists of 20 to 25 students, this makes it difficult to provide students with the attention that they need in the general education classroom. The implications of large, crowded classrooms are all too clear—issues with classroom management, time on task, and opportunities to provide students with individualized attention are all compromised. Challenging classroom behavior is an especially demanding issue for many of the teachers in this study. The teachers reported that they are persistently confronted with behavioral issues and are in a dilemma as they attempt to balance providing effective instruction and classroom management.

The teachers in this study pointed out that Black students are referred to special education because of behavior and assumptions by the teachers. They further noted that

their decision as a teacher to refer a student to special education is not a decision that is taken lightly. In addition, they reported that they do everything possible to meet the individual needs of students prior to a referral for special education is considered.

The teachers in this study remarked that they are also often in a dilemma in meeting the needs of students with language and reading concerns. They commented that students are referred to special education because of language and low reading skills. Teachers further pointed out that students with English as a Second Language (ESL) are often automatically referred to special education based on language alone. They also reported that many of their Black students are reading below grade level (e.g., reading on the first- or second-grade level) and have issues with language and speech. The teachers noted that they also face dilemmas when students are not performing as well as other students in the classroom and students are often referred to special education because of their inability to produce what is expected of them academically.

To further shape the theme of a *Teacher's Dilemma*, the teachers in this study reported that there are different beliefs about Black students and low expectations. They commented that Black students are not expected to achieve because of low expectations that are placed upon them by schools and a mostly White teaching staff. The teachers shared that the majority of teachers are not a cultural, racial, or socioeconomic reflection of American's changing student demographics.

The teachers in this study further pointed out that a teacher's knowledge and experience of the various cultures of his/her students are essential. They expressed that they help to build a positive relationship between teacher and student. Several teachers remarked that it is important for students to feel that their cultures are validated and

honored. Many teachers in this study noted that they felt that there is an over-representation of Black students in special education because of a lack in understanding of their culture.

Some teachers in this study commented that racism was alive in schools, consciously and unconsciously. Many teachers noted that special education was a superficial means of addressing the real issue—race. They further noted that racism is the “elephant” in the room that needs to be put on the table for discussion. Several teachers shared that Black students are sometimes referred to special education because of their appearance and where the student lives and the language spoken.

Research Question #2: How do teachers describe the changes in their processes, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of their district’s participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*? This is answered in the themes: *I See Color Now*, *Teacher Mis-Match*, and *Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development*.

I See Color Now

The teachers in this study described changes in the ways they provide services for students as a result of their school’s/district’s participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Several teachers in this study reported that student data are now being reviewed more through the lenses of race. They reported that they are speaking more openly and talking about race. In addition, the teachers noted that they feel comfortable going to their colleagues and initiating a conversation with them about various racial/cultural issues. The teachers shared that they were more careful and conscious as to how they speak about students of color and their families. Several teachers commented that they want to learn more about diversity.

The teachers in this study mentioned that through the follow-up *CC About Race* activities their racial consciousness has been increased. They reported that the activities have taught them that it is okay to see the color of their students and that if they did not see their color, then they did not see their students. Teachers reported that they are discovering many of the deeply held beliefs about race. The teachers also noted that *CC About Race* has raised their conscious awareness about race. They admitted that they do not know everything about race or even shared similar experiences as their students. Yet, they were open to learning more about the cultures of individual students. In addition, the teachers reported that *CC About Race* increased self-awareness of their own culture, their students, and the culture of other people in general. The teachers expressed that there was always something new to learn and they were more open and willing to expand their own cultural knowledge and experiences.

The teachers reported that when student data are reviewed, they are hearing, “What color is this student?” “Most of the students not making progress are from what sub-group?” In addition, teachers mentioned that they are having more open and honest conversations about race as it relates to their students. The teachers expressed that they are reflecting and having conversations about their own teaching with others. Several teachers in the study shared that they are more aware of who they are as persons of color and their own prejudices/biases that they may bring to the classroom.

The teachers in this study shared that they no longer felt the need to filter their conversations about race. They reported that they were more comfortable discussing race, and what and how they teach. Since *CC About Race*, teachers noticed that they were more culturally aware, they were more open to various perspectives, and their knowledge

of race has been heightened. As a result of this awareness, they examined the Connecticut's Mastery Test data by race and gender. In addition, the teachers noted that seeing color was also manifested in lesson design and instruction.

As a result of their participation in *CC About Race*, the teachers reported that the selection of curriculum materials is more intentional. The teachers mentioned that they reflected more on their own teaching style to ensure that it is culturally relevant. The teachers reported that they shared information about their own cultures with students and asked students questions about their cultures as a way of building relationships and rapport with students.

The teachers noted that many of the stories read in class were about characters from different countries. Several teachers noticed that they were asking students to validate the settings and characters. They noted that many of their students were from Haiti and Mexico. Students were asked such questions as, "Does this look like the Mexico or the Haiti where you are from?" "How is it the same or how is it different?" Several teachers expressed that the majority of curriculum materials being used by schools are written from the perspective of White middle-class men and do not reflect the diversity of the students.

Teacher Mis-Match

The teachers in this study shaped the foundation for this theme by noting that the majority of the teachers in Connecticut were White, female, and from middle-class backgrounds. Moreover, the teachers reported that there was a mis-match between student and teacher. They specifically commented that while the student population is

Black or of color and from low-income backgrounds, the teachers are mostly White from middle-class backgrounds.

The teachers in this study noted that there are preconceived ideas and assumptions about students and families. They discussed the important need for teachers to be culturally aware of their students. They further commented that a teacher does not necessarily need to be Black in order to teach students of color, but they need to have a clear understanding of their own culture and understand the various cultures of their students. The teachers reported that there is a disconnection between the student and teacher.

The teachers in this study reported that a teacher's background is critical to a Black student being referred to special education. They noted that as teachers, we teach who we are and see things through our individual lenses and experiences. The teachers expressed that there are teachers who want students of color to conform to their ways of thinking and behaviors. The teachers acknowledged that they do not know anything about the culture of their students or take the necessary time to get to know their students in order to build relationships and to learn about their cultures.

The teachers in this study noted that *CC About Race* provided them with a different perspective of the over-representation of Black students in special education. The teachers reported that they have a greater understanding of the intersection between race and education. They maintained that by understanding cultural differences, norms, values, and behaviors, the classroom teacher will reduce the number of students of color referred to special education.

The teachers in the study made the point that, as teachers, they teach according to what they know about their own culture and norms. Several teachers noted that they are better teachers today because they are open to the diverse cultures of students and families.

Affirming a Need for Ongoing Professional Development

The teachers in this study reported that many schools and teachers are not prepared to meet an ever-changing diverse population of students. They mentioned that professional development training is essential. The teachers further noted that *CC About Race* affirmed for them a need for ongoing professional training about different cultures. The teachers further commented that the seminars brought to the surface a need for training to assist them with effective instructional strategies and an understanding of different cultures, norms, and values. They also maintained that there is a significant need for professional development in the areas of race, diversity, culturally relevant instruction, and racial equity.

With the changing demographic landscape, the teachers in this study mentioned that they need ongoing, on-site job-embedded professional development tools and strategies to meet the ever-changing needs of students. Many of the teachers shared that the lack of training in cultural diversity contributed to the over-representation of Black students in special education. The teachers further noted that there was a need for more targeted professional development. They expressed that ongoing teacher training was needed to meet the changing demands of the classroom.

The teachers in the study reported that the demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation have led to changes in school

curriculum and instruction. Schools were being held accountable for the improved achievement of all students. However, they expressed that meeting the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds was a major challenge for most teachers and professional development was needed.

Discussion

Connecticut has struggled to address over-identification and disproportion in special education for a number of years. While the state's overall prevalence rates for identification of students in need of special education have declined during the past decade, there are proportional differences among Connecticut school districts within racial and ethnic segments of student populations. Specifically, data submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) indicated that African American and Hispanic/Latino students are two to three times more likely to be identified for special education than are their White peers in the categories of emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, and intellectually disabled.

In response to this ongoing concern about the over-representation of Black students in special education, the CSDE and SERC designed an intentional program effort to address the issue of the over-representation of Black students in special education. They worked closely with various districts in an engaging professional-development program. The program was designed to identify, define, and examine the connection between race and student achievement. In conjunction with Glenn E. Singleton, Director of Pacific Educational Group and SERC Coaches, participating districts have engaged in *Courageous Conversations About Race* as a means to examine philosophies, policies, procedures, and practices in their district, schools, and classrooms

that reflect institutionalized racism (Pacific Education Group, 2004). The overall goal of an intervention program was an effort to reduce the number of Black students being referred and placed in special education. Although the intentional intervention program did not necessarily reduce the number of Black students being referred and placed in special education as expected (see Tables 2-4), it did yield other results.

1. The teachers in the study reported that they were speaking more openly about race with their colleagues.

2. The teachers in the study were building relationships with students by sharing their racial autobiographies with them and asking students questions about their culture.

3. The teachers in the study were seeing the color of their students, instead of saying that they did not see color, only the students whom they teach.

4. The teachers in the study reported that they were reflecting on their own teaching style and methods. They were embedding culturally relevant pedagogy into their lesson design. Their lessons were more intentional.

5. The teachers in the study acknowledged a need for targeted ongoing on-site professional development with follow-up to assist them in meeting the ever-changing diversity in our schools. They were open and willing to learn more about diversity.

CC About Race was a means to examine philosophies, policies, procedures, and practices in districts, schools, and classrooms that reflect institutionalized racism. It was designed to address what educators, families, and other community group members can do to improve teaching and learning across racial lines. *CC About Race* was one strategy to assist educators in addressing the issue of the over-representation of Black students in special education. However, leaders must facilitate opportunities for members of their

staff and community to courageously dialogue about the intersection of race and education. The understandings generated by such dialogue served as the platform to develop structural systems, policies, and practices that lead to higher student achievement.

It goes without saying that teachers play a critical role in the life of their students. Both through a quality relationship (Ladson-Billings, 2000) and as “cultural agents” (J. Patton, 1998), students and teachers need to understand that they are cultural agents; they bring their own culture to the classroom and it influences how they perceive their students and how students perceive them. The research of Irvine (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1994) documented the critical role that teachers play in the achievement of students of color. “Not only do teachers influence the achievement and cognitive development of African American students; they also influence their self-concept and attitudes” (Irvine, 2003, p. 72). Students from culturally diverse backgrounds tend to be more dependent on teachers than do their other-race peers and tend to perform poorly in school when they do not like their teachers (Johnson & Prom-Jackson, 1986). Irvine (2003) states,

It does matter who the teacher is. Indeed, we teach who we are. Teachers bring to their work values, opinions, and beliefs; their prior socialization and present experiences; and their race, gender, ethnicity, and social class. These attributes and characteristics influence teachers’ perceptions of themselves as professionals. (p. 46)

Ferguson (2003) noted that content, pedagogy, and relationships affect how well ethnic and racial minority students learn. He contends that research has found that students’ relationship with their teachers differs by their backgrounds and affects their overall academic achievement. Sather and Henze (2001) concluded that understanding

the students who walk within the hallways of schools is as important as the level of skills each teacher brings with him or her. Building positive relationships can be linked to increased student achievement. Schools can improve racial relations between principals, teachers, parents, students, and the community by building bridges across the great racial gap, thus implying the importance of reaching and developing strong interpersonal relationships before teaching (Sather & Henze, 2001).

In a politically correct world, we are supposed to pretend that we do not notice differences between people. But in our effort to make everyone feel good about how racially sensitive we are toward others, we delude ourselves in thinking that race doesn't matter anymore. Paying attention to the cultural experience of students is important, given the differences between the demographics of American students and their teachers. According to reports from the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), roughly 80% of American teachers are White, while children of color make up more than 40% of the student body.

Critical Race Theory adds that cultural awareness does not and should not include color-blindness or race-neutral policies. Liberalism does not mean that teachers should be color-blind or race-neutral because these two approaches ignore the importance of race and racism within American society. Color-blindness would devalue the experiences and realities of students of color by denying that race preferences and racism exist. Instead, teachers need to be aware of the White power and privilege system in American education. When teachers acknowledge that the system is racist, they can move forward to not only avoid socially reproducing the racism, but also to rethink the system,

recognize their actions in it, change them if need be, and embrace all cultures as equally important.

Cole (1995) reported that good instruction is good instruction, regardless of students' racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. Unfortunately, numerous barriers can prevent lower income and minority students from receiving good instruction. These obstructions to effective instructional practices take the form of institutional programming, such as tracking, and as personal opinions, such as lack of cultural understanding. Research supports the belief that the effectiveness of a teacher, the attitude of a teacher, and the verbal and non-verbal expectations of a teacher are instrumental in tearing down barriers that interfere with effective instruction.

The over-representation of Black students in special education is an adaptive challenge that needs to move educators to do things differently. As the nation's demographics shift, the sight of a White teacher leaning over the desk of a "Brown or Black" student is likely to become more and more common. In order to be effective, teachers have to learn about the cultural experiences of their students, while using these experiences as a foundation for teaching. Consistent with the literature, the teachers in this study noted that the cultural background knowledge and experience of a teacher is important. When a teacher understands a student's background, culture, and language, and uses these characteristics as strengths to build upon, the student is validated and more likely to succeed. Furthermore, teachers who understand their students' cultures and backgrounds are better able to design instruction that best meets their needs (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

This interest convergence, as defined by Critical Race Theory (CRT), acknowledges “the legitimacy of cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’” dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum (Gay, 2000, p. 29). The reality of today’s classrooms is that a teacher will encounter students with identities different from his or her own (e.g., a middle-class White woman teaching a class of Native American/American Indian students), or, the classroom itself will be culturally diverse (i.e., composed of Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and White students).

There are many districts that are attempting to fix the over-representation with (e.g., an adaptive issue) technical solutions. Technical solutions are the things that we already know how to do: Those things that have worked in the past and we are really good at them and are what we have always done. The problem arises when doing what we have always done, regardless of how well we are doing it, is not working. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) call this “adaptive challenges.” Adaptive challenges require that we learn new ways, not simply get better at the old ways.

We are reminded by Hilliard (2004) that in order to eradicate the racially predictability of the achievement gap, educators must have the skill, will, and knowledge to uproot the underlying factors that contribute to the predictability of the achievement gaps. He further commented that to pull up “these truths,” we need to talk about institutionalized practices that perpetuate the isolation of students of color in an educational system that historically was not created for them. Hilliard (1999) noted that the knowledge and skills to educate all children already exist. However, the will of society to teach all children is questionable. He further concluded that because we have

lived historically in an oppressive society, educational issues tend to be framed as technical issues, which deny their political origin and meaning.

This study supported the need for ongoing job-embedded professional development for teachers. Teacher education programs and professional development efforts must prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students. These efforts must focus on teacher expectations in numerous of forms (e.g., biases, stereotypes, fears) so that deficit thinking and orientation are reduced and, ideally, eliminated. Teachers must participate in ongoing substantive self-reflection, and examine their biases toward and expectations of Black students. Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are White; most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay et al., 2003). Thus, many White educators simply have not acquired the experiential and education background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002).

It resonated with me that schools and districts going through *CC About Race* need to understand the change process. Change is development in use, and effective change takes time (Fullan, 1990). As a result of the districts' participation in SERC's program, *CC About Race* will eventually see changes in the over-representation of Black students in special education. Participating districts/schools going through the intentional intervention program reinforced for me the need for ongoing job-embedded professional development with follow-up technical assistance in order to see substantial changes in referral rates.

Hargreaves (1992) defined school culture as the existence of interplay between three factors: the attitudes and beliefs of persons both inside the school and in the external environment, the cultural norms of the school, and the relationships between persons in the school. Each of these factors may present barriers to change or a bridge to long-lasting implementation of school improvement (Hargreaves, 1992). I concur with the research on school culture that the attitudes and beliefs of persons in the school shape that culture. My research study confirmed for me the importance and need to create a positive school culture. The successful implementation of an initiative or innovation is dependent on the school culture. According to Fullan (1991), factors affecting implementation “form a system of variables that interact to determine success or failure” (p. 67).

Yukl (2002) noted that a leader can do many things to facilitate the successful implementation of change. Effective leaders establish moral purpose, build relationships, generate knowledge, understand the change process, and build coherence. Educational change is technically simple and socially complex, and never a checklist. There are no step-by-step shortcuts to transformation. It involves the hard day-to-day work of re-culturing (Fullan, 2001). Central to systems change is climate.

The teachers in the study reported that the demographic shifts in the student population along with accountability legislation have led to changes in school curriculum and instruction. Schools are being held accountable for the improved achievement of all students. However, they expressed that meeting the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is a major challenge for most teachers and professional development is needed.

Over the years, incremental change has occurred regarding the over-representation of Black students in special education, yet limited in scope and usually an extension of the past and does not disrupt past patterns (Quinn, 1996). On the other hand, deep change is needed and requires new ways of thinking and behaving.

Conclusions

While this qualitative study showed promise for identifying factors contributing to the over-representation of Black students in special education, engaging in courageous conversations about race is clearly not an institutionalized practice in the schools represented in this study. However, as we consider the statistical facts, it is difficult not to think about racial inequality as a predominant factor causing today's achievement gaps. It is our responsibility, as educators, to garner the courage to disaggregate and interpret the data through a "cultural eye" (Irvine, 2003). Only then can we engage in courageous conversations about race in order to improve student achievement.

Ninety percent of U.S. public school teachers are White; most grew up and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominantly White communities and received their teacher preparation in predominantly White colleges and universities (Gay et al., 2003). Teacher education programs and professional development efforts must prepare teachers to work with culturally diverse students, namely Black students. These efforts must focus on teacher expectations in a myriad of forms (e.g., biases, stereotypes, fears, etc.) so that deficit thinking and orientation are reduced and, ideally, eliminated. Teachers must participate in ongoing substantive self-reflection, and examine their bias relative to expectations of Black students.

Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena as they appear in natural settings (J. Patton, 2001). This qualitative study examined how teachers describe their working environment and how teachers describe the ways they provide services for students and have changed as a result of their school's/district's participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*.

Recommendations

For Schools

1. School districts and teacher preparation institutions must assume their important roles in educating teachers for the nation's increasingly multiracial student population.
2. Schools should examine current school philosophies, policies, structures, and practices through a lens of race and equity to ensure that they are designed to meet the needs of all learners.
3. School must examine their culturally based viewpoints, attitudes, and behaviors and recognize how their cultural beliefs may conflict with the cultural beliefs of their students (Obiakor, 1999).
4. Schools should regularly engage in interracial dialogue through *Courageous Conversation* (Singleton & Linton, 2006b, p. 16) in order to increase individual racial consciousness and explore the impact of race in the lives of both students and teachers and expose and address entrenched attitudes that hold students (and teachers) back.
5. Schools must engage in a variety of actions to address the disproportional use of exclusionary disciplinary practices with students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Townsend, 2000).

6. Schools must engage in ongoing professional development and follow up with technical assistance that includes monitoring and evaluation in order to impact effectiveness.

For Teachers

1. Teachers identify a variation of cultures within the classroom. Thus, by embracing the reality of diversity through such identification, seeing the color of their students is critical in creating an environment for equitable learning.

2. Teachers should learn about the cultural experiences of their students, while using these experiences as a foundation for teaching.

3. In addition to promoting learning and academic achievement, teachers must become culturally relevant and foster and support the development of cultural competence. Cultural competence refers to the ability to function effectively in one's culture of origin (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

4. Teachers need to keep what is best for the child at the center of their decision-making.

5. Culturally responsive teachers must feel a strong sense of responsibility for all students, including students referred for or already placed in special education (Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

6. Teachers must build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences and lived socio-cultural realities.

7. Teachers must use a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.

8. Teachers must encourage students to know and praise their own and each other's cultural heritages; and incorporate multicultural information, resources, and materials in all the subjects and skills routinely taught in schools (Gay, 2000).

Implications and Suggestions for Further Study

This study provides a basis for the examination of current local and state policies, practices, and philosophies regarding culturally responsive educational systems and informs pedagogical, curricular, assessment, and professional development. Specifically, the results of this study will assist the CT State Department of Education (CSDE) in their focused-monitoring efforts of local public schools in the area of over-representation of Black and Hispanic/Latino students in special education. In addition, the results will assist the State Education Resource Center (SERC) in the design of job-embedded and state-wide professional-development activities in order to be more responsive to the needs of local public schools in the following areas: (a) early intervening services; (b) cultural-relevant instruction; and (c) the over-representation of Black students in special education.

How Would I Change the Study?

If I were to do the study over, what I would do differently would consist of my designing a quantitative component to the study. Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) would be employed in order to gather informationally rich and useful information from a larger population of teachers and a total of 8 districts that participated in SERC's program, *Courageous About Race*, relevant to the over-representation of Black students in special education. An on-line survey would be emailed to existing participants' email list of all district team members participating in *CC About Race* from 2004 to 2007.

The survey would include questions regarding the impact of *CC About Race* in reducing the number of referrals of Black students to special education. In addition the survey would also include questions about school culture relative to Black students being referred to special education. Finally, questions would be included in the survey consisting of teachers identifying a change in attitudes, behaviors, and processes within themselves.

Adding a quantitative research component would be helpful in answering the research questions relevant to the districts' participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. For example, a survey could have been used to obtain information about the usefulness of the content of *CC About Race* (e.g., Critical Race Theory, Race in my Life, Culturally Relevant Teaching/Pedagogy, Teacher Relationship and Rapport with Students, and Cultural Appropriate Classroom Management) to reduce the number of Black students being referred to special education from participating districts.

Furthermore, based on the results of the qualitative study, I believe that it would have been valuable to add a quantitative component to my study in order to investigate the phenomena regarding the perceptions of general education teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically, why Black students are referred to special education. In addition to the questions above, statistical data would address the research questions regarding the percentages of teachers who are using Cultural Relevant Teaching, percentages of teachers sharing their culture with students, percentages of teachers getting to know the culture of their students, and the number of

teachers who identify with each of the specified reasons for referring Black students to special education.

APPENDIX A

REQUEST LETTER FOR SCHOOL DISTRICT PARTICIPATION



September 18, 2008

XXXXX
Superintendent
XXXXX Public Schools
XXXXX Street
XXXXX, CT 060516

Dear XXXXX:

Your district is invited to participate in a study being conducted by the State Education Resource Center (SERC). XXXXX Public Schools was selected because of its participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. The intent of this qualitative study is to gather information about the perceptions of teachers regarding referrals to special education and race, specifically fourth grade teachers. The results of the study will be used by SERC to design job-embedded professional development activities in order to meet the needs of local public schools in the area of culturally relevant instruction and the overrepresentation of Black and other students of color in special education.

I need your permission for David R. Grice, Consultant at SERC, to conduct one-on-one interviews with five fourth grade teachers in your district. David can work directly with identified principals of schools that participated in *Courageous Conversations About Race* to develop a list of teachers who best meet the outlined criteria for the study (e.g., teachers with three or more years of teaching experiences; balance of gender, race/ethnicity; a considerable numbers of referrals of Black students to special education). Interviews will take place at individual schools for approximately 60 minutes per teacher.

In the interest of full disclosure, in addition to the results of this study being used to enhance the quality and impact of numerous SERC activities, the results of this study will also be used by David for his dissertation. He is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in Leadership at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. His research will describe the attitudes and behaviors of fourth grade teachers regarding referral to special education. As Director of SERC, I am fully supportive of David's use of data from the SERC study.

Please be assured that SERC will protect the confidentiality, rights, interests, and wishes of the district and teacher participants when choices are made regarding reporting results

of the study. In addition to ensuring confidentiality in terms of the district name and the teachers' names, SERC will adhere to any additional procedures required by your district.

Please expect a follow-up call from David during the next two weeks. On behalf of students in Connecticut's schools, thank you for your continued support. Should you have specific questions or concerns related to this request, please do not hesitate to contact David R. Grice at SERC, (860) 632-1485, ext. 343.

Sincerely,

Marianne Kirner, Ph.D.

Director

Enclosures: Dissertation Abstract
Informed Consent Form

Cc: George A. Coleman, Deputy Commissioner, CSDE
James A. Tucker, Ph. D., Dissertation Chair, Andrews University
David R. Grice, Consultant, SERC



Informed Consent Form

I hereby give my informed consent for David R. Grice, Consultant at SERC, to conduct one-on-one interviews with five fourth teachers from the XXXXX Public Schools (e.g., XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, and XXXXX School).

Superintendent's Signature

Date



September 18, 2008

XXXXXX
Superintendent
XXXXXX Public Schools
XXXXXX Street
XXXXXX, CT 06360-2324

Dear XXXXX:

Your district is invited to participate in a study being conducted by the State Education Resource Center (SERC). XXXXX Public Schools was selected because of its participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. The intent of this qualitative study is to gather information about the perceptions of teachers regarding referrals to special education and race, specifically fourth grade teachers. The results of the study will be used by SERC to design job-embedded professional development activities in order to meet the needs of local public schools in the area of culturally relevant instruction and the over-representation of Black and other students of color in special education.

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Please expect a follow-up call from David during the next two weeks. On behalf of students in Connecticut's schools, thank you for your continued support. Should you have specific questions or concerns related to this request, please do not hesitate to contact David R. Grice at SERC, (860) 632-1485, ext. 343.

Sincerely,

Marianne Kirner, Ph.D.
Director

Enclosures: Dissertation Abstract
Informed Consent Form

Cc: George A. Coleman, Deputy Commissioner, CSDE
James A. Tucker, Ph. D., Dissertation Chair, Andrews University
David R. Grice, Consultant, SERC



Informed Consent Form

I hereby give my informed consent for David R. Grice, Consultant at SERC, to conduct one-on-one interviews with five fourth teachers from the Norwich Public Schools (e.g., XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, and XXXXX School).

Superintendent's Signature

Date



September 18, 2008

XXXXXX
Interim Superintendent of Schools
XXXXXX Public Schools
1110 Main Street
XXXXXX, CT 06108

Dear XXXXX:

Your district is invited to participate in a study being conducted by the State Education Resource Center (SERC). XXXXX Public Schools was selected because of its participation in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. The intent of this qualitative study is to gather information about the perceptions of teachers regarding referrals to special education and race, specifically fourth grade teachers. The results of the study will be used by SERC to design job-embedded professional development activities in order to meet the needs of local public schools in the area of culturally relevant instruction and the over-representation of Black and other students of color in special education.

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Please expect a follow-up call from David during the next two weeks. On behalf of students in Connecticut's schools, thank you for your continued support. Should you have specific questions or concerns related to this request, please do not hesitate to contact David R. Grice at SERC, (860) 632-1485, ext. 343.

Sincerely,

Marianne Kirner, Ph.D.
Director

Enclosures: Dissertation Abstract
Informed Consent Form

Cc: George A. Coleman, Deputy Commissioner, CSDE
James A. Tucker, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair, Andrews University
David R. Grice, Consultant, SERC



Informed Consent Form

I hereby give my informed consent for David R. Grice, Consultant at SERC, to conduct one-on-one interviews with five fourth teachers from the XXXXX Public Schools (e.g., XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, XXXXX School, and XXXXX School).

Superintendent's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL



January 22, 2009

David R. Grice
6 Tamarack Drive
Bloomfield, CT 06002

Dear David,

RE: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

IRB Protocol #: 08-131

Application Type: Original

Dept: Leadership

Review Category: Exempt

Action Taken: Approved

Advisor: Jim Tucker

Protocol Title: The Perceptions of General Education Elementary Teachers about the Overrepresentation of Black Students in Special Education

This letter is to advise you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved your proposal for research. You have been given clearance to proceed with your research plans.

All changes made to the study design and/or consent form, after initiation of the project, require prior approval from the IRB before such changes can be implemented. Feel free to contact our office if you have any questions. In all communications with our office, please be sure to identify your research by its IRB Protocol number.

The duration of the present approval is for one year. If your research is going to take more than one year, you must apply for an extension of your approval in order to be authorized to continue with this project.

Some proposal and research design designs may be of such a nature that participation in the project may involve certain risks to human subjects. If your project is one of this nature and in the implementation of your project an incidence occurs which results in a research-related adverse reaction and/or physical injury, such an occurrence must be reported immediately in writing to the Institutional Review Board. Any project-related physical injury must also be reported immediately to University Medical Specialties, by calling (269) 473-2222.

We wish you success as you implement the research project as outlined in the approved protocol.

Joseth Abara
Administrative Associate
Institutional Review Board

Institutional Review Board

Phone: (269) 471-6360

Fax: (269) 471-6246

E-mail: irb@andrews.edu

Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355

APPENDIX C
CONSENT FORM



Department of Leadership and Educational Administration

Informed Consent Form

Title of Study:

The Perceptions of General Education Elementary Teachers About the Over-representation of Black Students in Special Education

Primary Researcher:

David R. Grice, Doctoral Student, Department of Leadership and Educational Administration, Andrews University

Purpose:

I have been told that if I choose to participate, I will be voluntarily participating in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of general education teachers about the over-representation of Black students in special education, specifically why and how Black students are referred to special education. The qualitative study is to gather information about the perceptions of teachers regarding referrals to special education and race. The study intends to capture the perceptions of sixteen general education elementary teachers from two districts in Connecticut (e.g., eight teachers from each district) about the over-representation of Black students in special education.

I have been told that I will ask to participate in a one-on-one semi-structured interview. I will be asked open ended questions by the interviewer. The interview will last for approximately 60 minutes and will take place at individual schools. The interview will be conducted by the primary researcher. The qualitative study will attempt to describe how attitudes and behaviors of fourth grade teachers have changed as a result of their school/district participation in *Courageous Conversations About Race*.

Procedures:

I have been told that I must be a fourth grade general education teacher to participate in the study and required to sign an informed consent form. I have been told that the interview will be audio taped so that analysis can be done at a later date by the primary researcher. The information collected through the one-on-one semi-structured interview will be documented in writing in the form of a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Leadership from Andrews University. The dissertation will be shared with the primary researcher's dissertation committee.

Benefit:

I have been told that I may not receive any direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, the information collected during the study will may provide a basis for the examination of current local and state policies, practices, and philosophies regarding culturally responsive educational systems and inform pedagogical, curricular, assessment, and professional development in the following areas: (1) early intervening services; (2) culturally relevant instruction; and (3) the over-representation of Black students in special education.

Risks and Discomforts:

I have been told that there is minimal risk associated with participation in this study. That is, the probability and magnitude of discomfort or stress anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. I have been told that I may experience some discomfort when answering questions about attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions about the overrepresentation of Black students in special education. In addition, I have been told that my participation in the study is completely voluntary and that no participant is obligated to answer any question that is asked. I can choose not to answer a question or discontinue the interview at any time. The participants are presumed to be fully competent adults.

Risk of Injury:

I have been told that in the unlikely event of injury resulting from this research, Andrews University is not able to offer financial compensation.

Voluntary Participation:

I have been told that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary. I can withdraw at any time without any penalty or prejudice.

Confidentiality and/or Anonymity:

I have been told that my confidentiality will be protected in all aspects of the study. I have been told that my identity will not be disclosed in any published documents written about this study. The names of individual teachers, schools, and districts will not be included in the final research write up. All information gathered through interviews will be maintained by the researcher and destroyed at the completion of the study.

Reimbursement or Compensation:

I have been told that I will not receive compensation in the form of money or any other type of as a result of my participation in this study.

Participant Concerns:

I have been told that I have the right to contact the primary researcher or his advisor if I have questions or concerns about my participation in this study. I may contact the primary researcher, David R. Grice, SERC, 25 Industrial Park Road, Middletown, CT 06457 at (860) 632-1485, ext. 343, or Dr. James Tucker, Advisor, Post Office Box 15188, Chattanooga, TN 37415, (423) 425-5261.

Informed Consent:

I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the researcher. I understand that I have the right to ask questions of the primary researcher prior to consenting to participate in the study. Any questions I had about the study or my participation have been answered to my satisfaction. Therefore, I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this study.

If I have additional questions or concerns about my participation in this study, I can contact the primary researcher, David R. Grice at SERC, (860) 632-1485, ext. 343, or grice@ctserc.org.

Copy of Consent Form:

I have been told that I have the right to receive a copy of the informed consent form for this study. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Signature of Interviewee:

Signature of Interviewee

Date

Witness

Date

Signature of Researcher:

I have reviewed the contents of this form with the person signing above. I have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



**Department of Leadership and Educational Administration
Andrews University**

**The Perceptions of General Education Elementary Teachers About the
Over-representation of Black Students in Special Education**

Primary Researcher: David R. Grice

Demographic Information Sheet

To be Filled Out by Participants Prior to One-on-One Interviews

1. What is your name and the grade level that you teach?
2. Have you always taught at this particular school?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. Tell me about the demographics of your school.
5. I understand that your district/school participated in SERC's program, *Courageous Conversations About Race*. Were you a part of the District Level Team or the School Based Team? Or, did you participated in the follow-up discussions and activities provided by your district and/or school?
6. One of the goals of *Courageous Conversations About Race* was that members of the District Level and School Based Teams would turnkey/replicate the information and activities back in their individual districts/schools. Can you tell me about these activities and conversations?



**Department of Leadership and Educational Administration
Andrews University**

**The Perceptions of General Education Elementary Teachers About the
Over-representation of Black Students in Special Education**

Primary Researcher: David R. Grice

Revised Interview Questions

1. As you may be aware, there is an over-representation of Black students in special education in Connecticut and nationwide. Why do you think that Black students are disproportionately over-represented in special education when compared to their White peers? Generally speaking, what are some of the factors you feel contribute to whether or not Black students are referred to special education?

2. Let's talk about the background and prior experience of a teacher. Does a teacher's cultural background knowledge and prior experience make a difference? Can you elaborate? In what ways do you feel that the cultural background and prior experience of a teacher influence their decisions to refer a Black student to special education?

3. *Courageous Conversations About Race* was implemented by SERC and the CT State Department of Education as an effort to reduce the large number of referrals of Black students to special education. Participants attending the training program were asked to examine their districts'/schools' philosophy, policies, structures, and classrooms through the lenses of race. One of the guiding principles of *CC About Race* is the belief

that racial equity transformation begins with an individual at a personal level-keeping it personal, local, and immediate. Participants are asked to use “I” and/or “me” instead of “they and/or them” when speaking. With that being said, can you identify specifically how and in what ways your attitudes, behaviors, and/or perceptions have changed as a result of your school’s/district’s participation in *Courageous Conversation About Race*?

4. When we look at academic and social/emotional supports for students in general education, what is currently in place in your school and/or district to support the academic and social emotional learning of students prior to a referral to special education?

5. When you hear that there is an over-representation of Black students in special education, what phrases or pictures come to your mind?

6. If you had an opportunity to make recommendations for change regarding the over-representation of Black students in special education in Connecticut, what would be some of your recommendations?

7. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share about *Courageous Conversations About Race* or the over-identification of Black students in special education?

APPENDIX E

CONNECTICUT'S DISTRICT REFERENCE GROUPS (DRGs)

Connecticut's District Reference Groups (DRGs)

<p>District Reference Groups (DRGs) are groups of districts that have similar student and family background characteristics. The State Department of Education (SDE) developed DRGs to assist in reporting and analyzing school district data. They will be used in SDE reports to place district resources into perspective. They replace ERGs, which were first developed using 1980 census data and were updated in 1996 when 1990 census data were available and analyzed. The state's 166 school districts and three academies have been divided into nine groups, based on indicators of socioeconomic status, indicators of need and enrollment. Because both the socioeconomic status and needs of people in neighborhoods or schools within a district may vary significantly, DRGs are used only to compare data that are aggregated to the district level.</p> <p>The SDE used data elements from the 2000 Census that were based on the families of students attending public schools and from the 2004 Public School Information System (PSIS) data base. Three of the data elements - median family income, percentage of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher and percentage of children's parents holding jobs in executive, managerial or professional occupations - are measures of socioeconomic status. Three others (percentage of children living in families with a single parent, the percentage of children enrolled in public schools whose families have an income that makes them eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals and percentage of children whose families speak a language other than English at home) are indicators of need. Enrollment in the district in 2004 was a minor factor in the analysis.</p>
DRG A: Darien, Easton, New Canaan, Redding, Regional District 9, Ridgefield, Weston, Westport, Wilton
DRG B: Avon, Brookfield, Cheshire, Fairfield, Farmington, Glastonbury, Granby, Greenwich, Guilford, Madison, Monroe, New Fairfield, Newtown, Orange, Regional District 5, Regional District 15, Simsbury, South Windsor, Trumbull, West Hartford, Woodbridge
DRG C: Andover, Barkhamsted, Bethany, Bolton, Canton, Columbia, Cornwall, Ellington, Essex, Hebron, Mansfield, Marlborough, New Hartford, Oxford, Pomfret, Regional District 4, Regional District 7, Regional District 8, Regional District 10, Regional District 12, Regional District 13, Regional District 14, Regional District 17, Regional District 18, Regional District 19, Salem, Sherman, Somers, Suffield, Tolland
DRG D: Berlin, Bethel, Branford, Clinton, Colchester, Cromwell, East Granby, East Hampton, East Lyme, Ledyard, Milford, Newington, New Milford, North Haven, Old Saybrook, Rocky Hill, Shelton, Southington, Stonington, Wallingford, Waterford, Watertown, Wethersfield, Windsor
DRG E: Ashford, Bozrah, Brooklyn, Canaan, Chaplin, Chester, Colebrook, Coventry, Deep River, Eastford, East Haddam, Franklin, Hampton, Hartland, Kent, Lebanon, Lisbon, Litchfield, Norfolk, North Branford, North Stonington, Portland, Preston, Regional District 1, Regional District 6, Regional District 16, Salisbury, Scotland, Sharon, Thomaston, Union, Westbrook, Willington, Woodstock, Woodstock Academy
DRG F: Canterbury, East Windsor, Enfield, Griswold, Montville, North Canaan, Plainville, Plymouth, Regional District 11, Seymour, Sprague, Stafford, Sterling, Thompson, Voluntown, Windsor Locks, Wolcott
DRG G: Bloomfield, Bristol, East Haven, Gilbert Academy, Groton, Hamden, Killingly, Manchester, Middletown, Naugatuck, Norwich Free Academy, Plainfield, Putnam, Stratford, Torrington, Vernon, Winchester
DRG H: Ansonia, Danbury, Derby, East Hartford, Meriden, Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, West Haven
DRG I: Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury, Windham

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